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WINGS of DANGER

ARTHUR A. NELSON

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WINGS OF DANGER

That was Norma Raylescroft.

WINGS OF DANGER

A Novel

BY

ARTHUR A. NELSON

Not even Minos could chain
The wings of a mortal!"
OVID: METAMORPHOSES

NEW YORK
ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY
1915

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Second Edition

Published September, 1915

To All Adventurers
who ever sailed to the port of

DISCOVERY

Ten thousand Kings have fallen!
  Forgotten the thrones they hung
With gold and a million rubies,
  In the Song Never Sung! . . .
From the lost strand of Atlantis
  To the ends of the seventh sea
Rides the rusty ship of Adventure
  To the port of Discovery!

Helmsman, ah, dark Phœnician!
  Famed for your trader's brain —
Say, did yon redbeard Viking
  Follow your track again?
And you of the martial bearing,
  With the proud Roman face —
Which of your old-world Satraps
  Sailed ere we saw your race?

There by the swart Levantine
  Rides the Red Eric so bold,
Who followed the singing spindrift
  In his Sea-Snake of old! . . .
A Viking's thrall at the lookout,
  An Englishman down a-lee —
Goes the motley ship of Adventure
  To the port of Discovery!

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for so long as it may take to set down this history, I shall live in the other days; for it is conceivable to change the present and even forestall the future, but a man's past is behind him and he cannot duplicate it. So I sit staring into my ink-pool like some fabled necromancer of the "Arabian Nights," and see the vague sketch and caricature of a hundred old companions, black and white, in a hundred wild-goose chases, passing in brief review. I stroll on the wonderful Rand, in its heyday; and all upon a day, I step out of that life and into another, caught up and swept away in the master-plot of Cecil Rhodes. I stand once more with De Roquemort and the others in the ring of dark, staring faces, in Matabeleland, and see the *assegais* flashing in the sun; and then by the spectral mountains, in the red glare of the eruption, watching the dead, black, unholy shadows creep across the sky-line. . . . But best of all, I ride of nights and days to the House of Raylescroft—seeking for a lady, "the Rainbow Lady," as I used to call her in my dreams. For you may be sure of this: if I had never known and loved that lady, none of those things would have happened; and in fine, there would have been no story. And that takes me back to its beginning—the girl of the public square.

Slim, serene, with wide dark eyes set like jewels in her white face; her head tilted a little back, with a beckoning gesture; her lips half parted in a radiant smile; she stood while the sunlight streaming through

the tall French windows enveloped her with the gilded aura of a saint and made a picture to remember. That is how I like to recall her best in our early meetings; not as I saw her first in the square, inert and pallid, with horror-stricken eyes staring down in those other eyes of death.

That was Norma Raylescroft.

I remember as well as if it had been yesterday that day I rode up into Johannesburg town-square, in quest of trek-oxen; I was on the eve of starting up-country with René Duval, the noted sculptor of wild animals—the time he trekked across the threshold of this world into the next. Well, that was farther than he started for; but there is an old proverb of the pitcher and the well. I am not likely to forget that day, for, though I had no fortune in getting oxen before the next day, something else transpired which I would not have missed for all the oxen in the Transvaal; and it was no more than a low word of thanks from a girl's lips, and a glance from a pair of memory-haunting eyes.

That scene comes up before me now—like the visions of youth which are impossible to forget. I have only to shut my eyes and I enter the moving-picture show of memory. Picture after picture . . . they flash up abruptly, and pass; as real to me now as the rest of the world and these humdrum figures of flesh-and-blood Tommy Atkins in the making; of very undecorative rustic swains and too very decora-

tive country squires; of all the Bill Stokeses and Peggy O'Tooles of the every-day—those prosaic Pillars of the British Empire, now beginning to straggle homeward by twos and threes, in the early dusk, along the box-clipped hawthorn hedges flanking the road beneath my library windows.

The familiar figures of the every-day have passed on, and the hawthorn lane is silent. The tall old church-windows eastward are black in the gathering dusk.

And so, while the pictures are flashing on the screen, let me go back to the girl with the memory-haunting eyes.

To begin in Johannesburg public square. . . . Flowing by endlessly, like a running stream in eddies, along the congested pavements and even down the middle of the street, was a cosmopolitan crowd made up of opposites and extremes; Boers, Englishmen, German curb-brokers and the omnipresent Jew; tall, half-naked Zulus from behind the far-away wall of the Kwathlamba Mountains; yellow-faced Griquas and cringing little Hottentots—"Totties," in the easy vernacular of Marshall Square.

Close to the curb a Cockney street-hawker was crying his kickshaws and flimsy gilt trinkets to entrap the passers-by at his little stall. Opposite him in the open lounged a vendor of a different stamp, who dealt in deadlier wares—one of the Kora tribe of nomadic Bushmen, employed occasionally by the South African representative of a great Hamburg

firm of wild animal trainers to bring in wild things —all manner of oddities—for shipment to the famous museum overseas. Near by him stood an oddly fashioned wicker basket containing his primitive stock in trade—a couple of wickedly venomous African cobras; while he awaited with the black man's eternal patience the august pleasure of the Agent, who, in no hurry, for his part, was leisurely breakfasting within a noisy little bar around the corner.

At intervals, an ugly hooded head swayed sluggishly behind the holes in the basket-work, as if seeking something; and the bystanders saw a flash of deadly looking eyes and a lightning-like vision of a forked tongue darting out like a red streak of flame through the gaps in the loosely woven wicker. It was significant to them that the snake-seller did not lounge upon the basket, after the manner of natives when they have a long time to wait. Yet, if that silent nomad had but suspected it, he was standing over an active volcano, for reasons that will presently appear.

And now for the other part of the picture.

Out of the press came slowly a tall old man in his late fifties, but cast in some heroic mold. He was tanned as dark as mahogany and had the face of a Roman centurion, with long silvery-white hair and a flaming eagle's beak of a nose; and walked with a slight stoop belied by his great frame. At his heels came a girl who walked with a slow stride

peculiarly rhythmic and unhurried; while the crowd —though it overflowed the curbs, and the great Rand plutocrats and official demigods steered meekly in the reeling wakes of ill-favored Boers in their cups, and the naked black shoulders of the Kaffir mine-boys—parted magically for her as she calmly advanced.

She was scarcely more than twenty, perhaps, for there was something in the lithe grace of her supple figure which subtly suggested youth, though her features remained hidden by the crowd. I began to wonder who she was and where she had learned to walk like that—like the great ladies I had once seen as a boy in England. The old Titan's daughter, to hazard a guess.

They stepped down at the curb and headed across the square, passing a few paces from where I was posted by my saddled nag, idly watching the crowds and drawing stage circles in the dust with the point of a heavy, old-fashioned hunting-crop; the kind of whip which is always "loaded" at one end with a piece of metal.

As they passed me I managed to get a fleeting glimpse of the girl's face, and experienced an involuntary catch of the breath. It was a lovely, perfect face, of the rare type that engraves its image upon the memory. To look upon its splendid serenity was like gazing into the deep waters of some crystal tide; mere beauty was but a little part of what was pictured there! I was not one to rave

over a pretty woman; but a face like that had never crossed my horizon until that hour, and it set my blood tingling.

Heedless of the crowd and looking neither to right nor left, they went on, the old colossus in the lead and the girl close at his heels. Just ahead and directly in their path stood the half-naked Kora, engaged in a heated squabble with a couple of dwarfish Hottentots. His back was turned so that he did not see who came.

Suddenly, with a scream, the girl halted dead in her tracks, gazing as if fascinated at some object on the ground, while the old gentleman, turning too abruptly, wavered, lost his footing on the uneven paving-stones and fell. Unnoticed by the Kora by reason of his absorbing row with the "Totties," one of the cobras had worked its way through a gap in the wicker, which was old and worn and insecurely woven—not fit to contain deadly creatures —and that was why the Kora might as well have been standing over a raging crater.

A sudden swish on the pavement—one sinuous writhe and coil, and the hideous thing, infuriated almost to madness by the noise and the crowd, instantly stopped within a foot of the advancing girl—a living horror coiled to strike! She remained inert, paralyzed with fear and seemingly rooted in her tracks. The snake faced her with ominously swaying head, while the Kora turned around to see what was the matter; but seeing, stood as if spellbound

and made no move to interfere. Neither did the spectators; nobody interfered. That was the other picture! It was not one to be soon forgotten.

Then the horrible spell was broken. With an oath, I had thrown myself between the white-faced girl and the swaying horror on the ground, sweeping her out of the way. There was a moment of shuddering suspense—I saw two terrible little eyes burning wickedly into mine like a pair of diamonds; and struck out suddenly with the heavy crop. The loaded whipstock lit true on the snake's swaying head. It collapsed like a shattered cricket-ball, and with my boot-heel I stamped it into shapeless pulp. The cobra writhed a little and lay still. The girl shivered slightly but recovered herself with an effort, and raised her eyes, alive with gratitude, to mine. It was like an electric shock.

"I cannot thank you fittingly, but I shall never forget!"

It was all she said, but in the convincing melody of a remarkable voice her few words possessed the weight of a whole benediction. I hesitated; and under the level gaze of her eloquent dark eyes, I grew preposterously embarrassed. I could only stammer out some inarticulate reply.

The old Roman had picked himself up with astonishing celerity for one of his years. His great frame was still vigorous and active and his temper clearly none of the best; his irascible gestures were the reverse of everything senile. There wasn't any-

thing the matter with him. He had slipped on the paving-stones. And as he began to speak, his voice was vital and brusk, not to say brutally harsh, and he had a queer trick of jerking his words out as though they were nails that he forcibly extracted. He ripped out:

"My daughter is right—we can't thank you here. Of course it's not the place—this crowd! Damme, as thick as flies!" He glared all around him several times like an enraged and indignant turkey-gobbler. He was very red in the face. A lot of people were staring. "Curse 'em!" he cried. "Let 'em stare! You're a trump! A most remarkably prompt young man! You will come to see us to-morrow? The gray house on the hill. . . ." He took a fresh start. "You'll find that John Raylescroft never forgets a favor. That's my name; you'll have heard of *me* in Africa, I daresay. Queen's subject. . . . There's my hand! And you, sir?"

"My name is Alan Severn," I answered.

"And your profession?" he jerked out.

"I'm—er—a sort of freelance, you know."

"Ah!" he muttered. There was a world of meaning in his monosyllables. A shade of stiffness had come into his manner. He strove palpably to repress it and did not succeed. He said: "Never mind, come out and see us, anyway. But wait—lend me your whip!"

He took the crop from my unresisting hand and

sprung, with a single bound, upon the astonished Kora. Seizing the man in a ruthless iron grip, he cut him half a dozen times across his naked shoulders—then deliberately gave him the loaded end twice on his bullet skull. It struck me as an odd procedure before a lady.

She did not wince nor cry out, but silently accepted the inevitable. I saw her glance swiftly at me and blush red with shame—and saw a wave of pity sweep across her white face. At the second rap the poor wretch, half stunned, went lurching to the pavement and blindly essayed to crawl out of reach. He was too late. The whipstock fell again. He rolled over and lay quite still. Some one held his head and gave him Cape brandy.

Raylescroft faced up and bit down an oath. He had a strange expression in his eyes. It was plain that he was the owner of a black temper.

"There, you scoundrel!" he barked. "That will teach you not to leave poisonous serpents about in people's way!" He turned to me. "Thank you, Mr. Alan Severn, there's your whip! Come and see us to-morrow. Come, Norma, we can't stand here forever with all these people gaping at us open-mouthed!"

He wheeled about.

I am afraid I stared. So that was her name—Norma! It had, even in that old man's harsh, aged voice, a dreamily enchanting sound, like a chord of

music. And, followed by the dark-eyed, quiet beauty with the oddly fascinating name, that imperious old man turned away.

As for me, I could only stare helplessly, and wonder if I should take him at his word and go to see them on the morrow. It was a problem to set me racking my brains for the answer; and at length, half unsure of my reception, I decided to abandon the idea. And then, tossing the poor devil of a Kora, who had revived sufficiently to sit up, a sovereign in payment for his demolished cobra and his broken head, I turned and walked slowly back to the curb. The crowd had melted away.

In those days I was a professional "up-country man"—and in Africa men know the meaning of that phrase. I was a walking Baedeker—a human handbook whose pages opened only to the touch of gold. From Nigeria to the Cape, and along the Ivory Coast, and even in the blazing sands of the Saharas, you may find them; they are the gentlemen-adventurers, the masterless mercenaries whose services any man may buy—for a price. It was a life impossible enough in any land but Africa.

It was inevitable, I think, for I had my share of the roving Severn blood, the compelling strain of the Wanderlust. Generation after generation, the Severns had all been wanderers; it was some ineradicable impulse in the blood. And so I, too, had followed

the call, as my father had done before me in his day—he had emigrated from Devonshire, in England. I had traveled up by post-cart from Natal, making for the new Rhodesian goldfields—though I did not flaunt my going in the face of the dayshine. It was discreet enough, that flitting, and a bit *sub rosa;* for my father, a rather dimly shining light of the Colonial bar, had destined me for a barrister's career.

Even now it is vaguely disagreeable to review that first year's unloved friction with the chastening surface of my round-topped legal stool. Accordingly I had flitted. In time, I had been forgiven for taking French leave, and was reluctantly acquitted of being cut out for a counselor. But fortune plays strange pranks. And in the upshot—stony broke—I had drifted into the Mounted Police. At first, my hard-riding companions-in-arms, the ruthless, invincible spirits who matched immortal Balaclavan charges with the iron courage of Wilson's heroic Patrol, in that blind dash after Lobengula to the Zambesi, eyed me askance; for a barrister's son in the irregular police was as great an oddity as a gentleman ranker in the army. Those long, wild, solitary rides across the quiet *veld*—a speck in a sea of bush—many of them night rides with only the moon and stars for company, made a man of me at last. Later, I saw service in two Matabele wars and learned how to take double toll for a steel-cased

bullet fired from a Lee-Metford. They had an unhappy file-formation, those Matabele—and the English troops knew it.

At my discharge I had drifted gracelessly from one place to another, but managed in the meanwhile to see a deal of the country. For awhile I set up at Buluwayo and prospered spasmodically until a day when the Cape-to-Cairo Survey arrived, and gave me the post of one of its hirelings—he had blown out his brains in the strain of a long African night at Nairobi, with the dreadful, mysterious, menacing beat of the native "bush-telegraph" drumming everlastingly in his ears.

Afterward, I was made the overseer of a reeking crew of coolies on the new Uganda Railway. I remember very well how the word of my first promotion was brought to me at the billiard-tables of the Mombasa Club, by the seaward windows looking on Kilindini Harbor—the long, low face of the fort; the gingerbread architecture of the Liwali's palace; and I remember that I was playing off a score with the young Liwali, who was going away to be educated at some place in Europe. I showed him my yellow telegram, and he wished me luck, with a shadowy smile on his dark, Arab face; and then I went away. He thought I would never come back; but I was fever-bit like himself; and in truth the berth suited me immensely, what with the big-game shooting and the wild life of the road-camps and the

command of men of mixed nations—their lives were never worth much more than sixpence. People had begun to point me out in the Protectorate, and I lived in an exaggerated atmosphere of repressed bravado, though I had very early schooled my features to wear a hard-set mask. But in those five years I had got the name of knowing the country as few men knew it; and so eventually I found my account in it. In a word, I turned freelance—became a gentleman adventurer-at-large. I had plenty of takers, and my services came high.

But there was risk enough. There was the fever-coast below Beira. Many hard things have been said of that reach of coast. Men of many lands have said them. In marble and in granite they are written—not as artistic efforts but by way of epitaph. On the Admiralty Charts that coast is colored a watery yellow, ostensibly denoting its low elevation, but meaning in point of fact that it is the perennial abode of a grim and perilous monster—Fever.

To think that men have given up their own hearthstones and risked their all, tearing themselves away from their friends and the bosoms of their families, from loving wives, perhaps, and the prattle of little children, for the "Silent Places," for this—the courtship of danger; to think of that is to realize what mysteries lurk within a human soul! Well, I have known many; the best and the worst of them. In the quick flood of my reminiscence, I see them go

by, one after another; a gallant and picturesque crew.

There was H. H. the Prince of Pless, a decadent son of the warrior Goths, and a great sybarite, for all his fighting ancestry, who trekked with me to the Victoria Falls, and carried (by proxy) an amazing arsenal of sporting Mannlichers. The Mannlicher was the Austrian state service-arm. It is a wicked thing.

There was old Lord Melton, K. C. B., who took back to England as mural decorations a whole ship-load of horns and hides—most of which he had got from the native chiefs; for Melton seldom by any accident killed anything but time. To serve him was a perilous thing, for he let fly his dum-dum bullets quite as promiscuously as he scattered his good British sovereigns.

There was René Duval, the sculptor, who played with death once too often; for a mangy old lioness in Bechuanaland, which he had rashly stalked by moonlight, bit his windpipe right out one night when his gun-breech jammed—after he had fired two shots into her loins. After that the lioness decamped and died out in the bush. I found her the next day, all crumpled up like a wet rag, and cursed her; there was nothing else to do. We buried poor Duval under a frowning cliffside where the hyenas will never disturb him, and trekked straight home.

There was also a lady—the first and last to take me into her pay. It was the Inyanga Plains that

trip, and the lady was the handsome, eccentric Countess Diane de Montfleur; a comely Amazon but peppery in the mouth; a dashing Diana (and she looked it) who lived up to her name and went on the war-path in light marching order. Merely to look on while Madame, in the final word in "abbreviations," contrived to miss four large eland, well bunched at sixty paces, was to sign articles of slavery. She nearly always missed; but her shooting-kilts, though a trifle short, were wickedly becoming, and her figure was beautiful and *svelte*. She was very much "a matter of form," the Countess Diane.

And there was Banister, the Yankee millionaire. He had a mania for exploring a fever-smitten country, and burned with a barbaric lust to kill. He left a trail of bleaching bones behind him—until, upon a day, an old rogue rhino met him in the narrow way. He pumped that grim beast full of lead-alloy made in the States—but he kept on coming like a brute Nemesis. Before the end came, the rhino had gored him twice and marked him for life with a twisted leg. In the sequel, his fickle *fiancée* in America had jilted him heartlessly, and married a rival millionaire who had displayed the good sense to stay at home and improve his opportunities and retain the conventional contour of his limbs. *Fiancées* are horribly unreliable things! And Banister himself, by last accounts, is doggedly limping across Thibet, with rifles and notes and aneroids; counting

the dreary steps; hiding his disillusionment from the world—trying to forget!

There were many more whose names and faces I cannot stop to recall; they are scattered now to the ends of the earth.

Finally, there was the Rt. Hon. Cecil Rhodes.

Not the unreal Rhodes of the *Blue Book*, nor yet the formal Rhodes of history, but the real Rhodes without the mask; the great adventurer whose colossal dream of empire made Africa and Europe reel. That was the Rhodes I knew. I was his old lieutenant in the great Annexation Plot—and I have come out alive! That fact seems wonderful enough to me. But you who scarcely know what the Rhodes dream was, save only from dark, discredited rumors, stifled overseas, from the shadows of dead events, and from the pages of discreet chroniclers who will not tell you all they know—you will smile rather sceptically, perhaps. But Cecil Rhodes is gone to face a higher Court of Inquiry, and I let it pass! . . . What is your unbelief to me?

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE OF RAYLESCROFT

YESTERDAY I had decided not to call and be thanked; something in Raylescroft's eyes had repelled me. But the girl's face haunted me. After all, why should I be a boor? To-day I would play the gentleman; to-morrow I would trek. It would wipe the slate clean of errors —and she would forget.

It had taken me, in truth, until mid-afternoon to make up my mind to face that old cynic's chilling eyes. But at least it was the time-honored privilege of a gentleman to call and be thanked indefinitely; and I had as valid a right to the name as my clever cousin, Mr. Sheridan Severn, barrister-at-law. But he had held to the gentleman's estate, and presumably was still pounding away at the law, in England, while I had gone in for the siren-song of adventure and the "Dark Places of the Earth." You may not live your life upon the plane of the barbarian without getting some of the dust in your eyes.

And yet it is a vague enough thing to be a gentleman. It has its limits and its possibilities. For example, I could add that a certain wild henchman of mine, by name Ingulfa, sometimes called the "Wan-

derer," was very much of a gentleman on the whole, for a savage. I suppose he was a savage; I am not altogether sure. He was a kind of latter-day Perseus in quest of a mythical monster; some terrific Gorgon. But he did not know that then, and neither did I. I believe there was something amiss with his memory; a hiatus. And so, without seeking a better pretext, I mounted and took the road to the House of Raylescroft.

Old Raylescroft had given me his direction in one of his laconic sentences—the gray house on the hill. It was not hard to find, for the house was a well-known landmark of the country round, and a Boer with a broken nose, of whom I stopped to inquire the way, pointed to the Krugersdorp road and told me it was a matter of an hour's ride. I came up to it at last as the afternoon was waning. It was a huge fantastic pile, built altogether of hewn stone of an aged grayish-white hue, and it stood in a commanding position upon an upland crowned by a gigantic *kop*. The building itself was perched right at the top of this enormous egg-shaped hill, which, at an amazing expenditure of labor, had been leveled for the purpose—a strange and certainly an inconvenient dwelling-site. But Raylescroft, as I found out later, was a strange and uncommonly inconvenient person; and the location had one irresistible charm: it afforded a lovely view for miles around.

There was a broad avenue curving splendidly up

the flank of the hillside, hemmed by a double row of beautiful eucalyptus trees, and the entrance was guarded by a tall iron gate resting upon two great stone pillars. And somehow this dwelling, which was built in the Gothic style of architecture, reminded me of some feudal castle of the Middle Ages; and it wanted little play of the imagination to see in Raylescroft himself a feudal captain of the most approved stamp. But there it stood, a frowning tribute to the forgotten past, and there he lived in medieval magnificence like a robber-baron of long ago.

A Kaffir boy opened the gate and took charge of my horse. I stared up the tree-flanked avenue and espied a vision of beauty sitting, book in hand, upon a feudal alcoved terrace. A moment after, the vision vanished, flitting indoors at my approach. Her flight proved to be only temporary, and doubtless had to do with one of those purely feminine readjustments in which all women indulge on occasion, for by the time I had got to the end of the trees and reached the house, I could see her white figure in the vestibule.

Fortune had elected to be kind, for once, when she might have frowned. There was no juggling of a bell, nor any argus-in-waiting to usher me with cold formality into a room where the chilling shadows of conventions reigned like frigid little gods. The door was wide ajar, framing the picture which I never forgot, of the girl all in white—the girl of the square—

and I looked at her with a queer catch in my throat. I had not said three words. She gave me a dazzling smile that set my head awhirl.

She was smiling still, her face half turned back, as I followed her mechanically into a handsome drawing-room with tall French windows. Possibly, too, she may have blushed a little. That was my entry to the enchanted mansion.

She was quick to put me at my ease.

"This is a belated pleasure!" she said swiftly, and her eyes swept my face with all a woman's intuition. "Candidly, I had given you up. I had fancied that perhaps my father . . . But you must not mind him—he is my own particular bugaboo!" and she laughed. "You did not mean to come? Why did you change your mind?"

"That was the kaleidoscopic emptiness of my life," I confessed candidly. "Perhaps it was the craving for something more elevating than the society of wild men—and the wish to have at least one priceless memory to take with me out there. . . ." I pointed vaguely to the edge of the horizon.

She measured me with eloquent eyes.

"And is your life, then, so empty? Well, that is strange! I have sometimes thought it must be grand to be able to forget the prosy littlenesses of civilized existence and boldly launch oneself into the unforeseen. Why, that is the very glamour of Romance—that is life! But how can I thank you for that brave deed of yesterday! Oh, if I might find

a way! But tell me, how may I make myself 'elevating'?"

"By forgetting yesterday," I answered.

She seemed a little astonished.

"Will that please you? Well, I will try, but I warn you that I shall not succeed."

"You make too much of it," I protested.

"Ah, well," was the quiet answer, "I do not think so. I saw it all, saw you stoop right over that horror to make sure! If you had stumbled, if your hand had erred by just one little inch—well, you would not be here. To you as well as to me that thing was *deadly*. Its eyes . . . Oh, I cannot banish it!"

"I too," I said, "have failed to banish all I saw."

She bent forward, shuddering. "You mean its eyes? Yes, they were dreadful."

"You are quite wrong," I said. "I meant other eyes more perilous to me—the most perilous, perhaps, in Africa."

I said it slowly—deliberately; to save my soul, I could not have left it unspoken. The words positively uttered themselves. In the next second I would have given much to recall them. I saw I was in deep water. She reddened slowly to her temples, but finally threw back her head and laughed. In truth, it cleared the atmosphere.

"Ah," she said, "I am not dense, and the subject shall be changed. How quick you are for one

who is condemned to the society of wild men! But please do not uncork any more compliments."

"The cork flew out unbidden," I humbly apologized.

"Mercy on us! Then don't drop the bottle! It seems," she said graciously, "that men must say these things, and I have noticed always that the braver the men, the worse they always say them. After all, it is an exclusively masculine prerogative, though I daresay you are quite puffed up with it; doesn't it demand a decoration?"

"None," I said daringly, "which is not fashioned in your likeness."

It was a long shot, at a venture. She turned her amused eyes upon me; and they had a curious effect of seeming to probe electrically into my soul. I met them abashed. I had an uncomfortable conviction that I was treading on dangerous ground.

"You are very exacting, but I am anxious to please. And I suppose you meant by that my picture? Well, you shall have it. It is little enough to offer in return for that dreadful risk of yesterday."

We got up together—she with the purpose implied in her words; and I, if the truth is told, to prevent her from carrying out that purpose, for I felt that I had permitted myself to go far, and my presumption was rapidly receiving an unforgetable lesson. I stammered out a hasty remonstrance, but she checked me quietly, and stepping into a hidden alcove in the recess of the window-seat, she took some ob-

ject from a drawer of a little rosewood secretary and put it into my hand.

I surveyed it spellbound. It was a handsome miniature portrait of herself, imprisoned in a little oval case of heavy gold set with a circle of sparkling diamonds. It had been fashioned, as I learned later, by a Russian painter of some repute, who had drifted out to South Africa under a cloud and had been glad to get stray commissions of that sort. The case had been made in Paris by a famous jeweler and must have cost a very pretty penny.

"I wish you to keep this, if you will," she said so winningly that I was overtaken by a blush of shame. "It is all that I can offer you—and yet it is so little!"

She shivered slightly, and involuntarily raised one hand to her eyes, as if to shut out some disagreeable sight. "Keep it, please; it is my earnest desire."

I would have given everything I owned in the world to possess the portrait; but somehow I found the grace to reply:

"It won't do, I am afraid. Perhaps I have presumed unpardonably; but there are still such things as honor and fair play. Let me undeceive you as to myself. I am, unfortunately, a needy mercenary whose only lode-star is hard gold—and of that I have precious little—a grasping person, I assure you, a chance hanger-on in a pleasant world, a mere pen-

niless adventurer. Now you have my measure!"

"You may be all of those things," she said quietly. "At least you are a brave man. I like brave men. Will you accept my friendship with the picture?"

I hesitated, weighing the miniature in my hand. I was not too great a simpleton to perceive that I had been cleverly driven into a *cul de sac*. To refuse that princely bauble was to reject perhaps her priceless friendship.

"It is still too little," she threw in, very pat with my thoughts.

"It is," said I, very low, "too fine a reward for so poor a cavalier. This costly keepsake is overweight. To refuse it is very difficult, but to accept it would be sheer presumption. You are in error; such things are not for me. I have learned to-day a much needed lesson in manners—believe me, it shall not be forgotten. Be advised, and don't tempt me to change my mind. The prize is very alluring and human nature is weak."

Clearly the reply pleased her, for she laughed gayly and urged: "Change it then, since it is my desire. For you see, womanlike, I mean to have my way."

I could do nothing less than capitulate with a good grace—and in truth, it was not hard to do. When a pretty woman sets her mind on a thing it is folly for a man to gainsay her.

"Presumption triumphs," I said; "long live pre-

sumption! Permit me to observe that you have reversed the balance; I am the debtor now and you the creditor."

"That is not true, sir Cavalier of Pretty Speeches," but there was a deeper undercurrent beneath the banter. "My debts are not so easily repaid. It is settled, then, that you will keep the trinket? You are wise to give a woman her way. And remember," she added demurely, "you cannot banish it!"

"It is hopeless for me to try," I said; and fitting the action to the promise, I placed the miniature in my breast-pocket, just as a heavy step sounded in the hall. It was Raylescroft, returning from a visit to an outlying stock-farm. He greeted me a trifle more cordially than I had led myself to expect from his manner of the previous day, and even pressed me to remain and dine with them, an invitation I saw fit to decline.

He rummaged a decanter from a costly sideboard, and made me drink a glass of port with him, all the while surveying me intently over the rim of his glass. His eyes seemed to bore straight into my brain. There was something masterful, striking, and yet in a way repellant in that old man. He reminded me of some warlike old Goth. For all his six feet of stature, he was paunchy to the verge of corpulence, with snapping black eyes, a powerful jaw, strangely marred by the habitual and visibly cynical sneer around the lips, and hair prematurely silvered,

I have sometimes thought, by his early adventurous life among the Zulu Kaffirs.

He had a private history, some of whose early chapters would not make pleasant reading. This, of course, I gathered at a later day.

Years before, Raylescroft had been the instrument in crushing a native uprising led by a bloodthirsty Kaffir chief named Mpandu, who was another Dingaan, only on a smaller scale. At the head of a handful of settlers, chiefly Boers, who had been inflamed by the Zulu atrocities, he had attacked Mpandu's people in their all but impregnable stronghold upon a wild spur of the Drákensberg, and, so the tale ran, after slaying the redoubtable Mpandu with his own hand, he penned up the unfortunate wretches in their mountain fastness until starvation finally drove them forth, when he destroyed them to the last man. It was a terrible lesson and the Kaffirs in that part of the country never forgot it. But Raylescroft, though he was in reality a subject of the Queen, was rewarded by the Boer *Volksraad* with a vast tract of land upon which he had prospered exceedingly.

Raylescroft was a widower of fifteen years' standing. He lived with his daughter in that great somber house in almost feudal opulence, surrounded by a small army of Kaffir servants. He kept in his employ a dozen or more white drovers and overseers. Most of them were Boers; he appeared to detest the sight of an Anglo-Saxon. He ruled them all

with an iron hand and was said to be a hard task-master. For all that, his daughter wound him around her finger. She was the only being he loved on earth—or in heaven, for that matter; and her will was almost a law with him, save for certain obscure limitations. Precisely what those limitations were, lay remotely screened in the labyrinth of his own hard brain; no man had ever unmasked them. I came to know that household well in after days, yet its master was a riddle I never solved until the day I found him sitting stone-dead in his chair. I can see him still, sometimes, sitting there bolt upright with his eyes wide open, and clutching rigidly in his big dead hand the key—a mere slip of paper, with a seal and a bluish watermark and a blurred jumble of words and figures—which unlocked that puzzling cryptogram, himself. But that is getting ahead of the story.

I watched him now with an odd fascination—watched him pass abruptly from the room, leaving us there together. Outside, the red haze of evenfall was mellowing the *veld*. I rose reluctantly to go, and she followed me out on the feudal terrace. We shook hands rather quietly. In that wonderful golden glow, speech would have seemed like a sacrilege. I walked quite mechanically to the steps, but paused there. Something seemed left unsaid. . . . For a moment I stood silently staring at the inexorable, distant sky-line. Then I faced about.

"Good-by," I said. "I'm off for Bechuanaland to-morrow."

"Good-by," she said softly, and somehow I fancied there was a shade of regret in her voice, "and good luck!"

I mounted and rode away.

Once well out of sight of the House of Raylescroft, turning the bend of the road a mile away, I reined in my horse impatiently and drew out the miniature I had won. By fair play or by foul play I had won it —*it*, at least, was mine! A stray shaft of the sunset fell upon it and lit the flashing stones and the smiling face they encircled in its fading beam. I gazed at it long and earnestly, but the longer I gazed the madder grew my thoughts; there was something mocking in its splendid sheen. I was wise enough even then, you see, not to palter with the truth or attempt to disguise it from myself. I knew very well what had happened to me in the little space of twenty-four hours. I agreed to myself:

"Your race is run, Alan, my lad, but it won't do! Trust a fool to chase the rainbow, but you will never catch it! In fine, you are a greater fool than knave!"

The light faded. I put away the miniature and gave my horse the spur. He broke eagerly into his stride. My pulse was bounding. In that instant my mind was made up. It was all inevitable; all irrevocable. No man may fight his destiny; and if it

was mine to chase the rainbow, I would follow it with a strong heart. But between Johannesburg and me lay just at present an hour's stiff canter. I made it in half, riding like a Musketeer.

The moon came up early and threw a silvery radiance over everything as I rode into the outskirts of the great gold town. Here and there outlying Kaffir huts, and beyond them long lines of corrugated iron houses, lay bathed in a quiet mystery of light. Tall, grim, iron stacks, colossally slender, stood out against the sky-line like giant black fingers striving to clutch a star. Enormous cyanide-vats squatted cheek-by-jowl in double tiers; elevated trams hung daringly in mid-air. Slime-wheels, trestles and huge, detached masses of mining-gear loomed immense and ghostly as I advanced on them—then vanished like so many specters as I clattered by.

I rode straight into the heart of the town and into a blaze of electric lights; on past the Rand Club and the Arcade, with its shops and glitter of plate-glass, and down a broad modern thoroughfare teeming with life to every beat of its metropolitan pulse. I kept on at a slow pace till I came to the place I sought, a snug little café off the square, kept by a suave old Greek, universally known as "Papa." Here, dismounting at the curb and giving my horse to a stalwart Pondomise "boy" to hold, I entered and presently dined to my unalloyed satisfaction. Then at length, pushing back my chair from the little marble-topped table, I tossed a stray rupee to the East In-

dian party who had brought in the things, and settled my shot with the cashier, an olive-faced son of Athens, in the coin of the South African Republic.

Such was Johannesburg, the "New Jerusalem," Johannesburg the cosmopolitan and amazing. All the polyglot spindrift of humanity foregathered incongruously there in its streets; yes, and in my pockets were the coins of half a dozen nations. Had I wished, I might have found both the match and takers for them all.

Then I made for the street, congested with a motley current of pedestrians representing nearly every nationality under the moon. I halted at the tall façade of a hotel, into which I dived familiarly and passed up a faded red-plush stairway to the rooms of René Duval. A dark-complexioned young man in velveteens, with a little, spiked mustache, and very black, very round eyes like rapier points, sprang up from a remarkably realistic figure of a life-size lioness crouching to spring, modeled in plastic clay, and came over to me with his face alight with an oddly winning smile.

"Ah, Alan, my boy," he bubbled, "look! I have been giving Her Ladyship a pair of topaz eyes. See, is she not abominably fine? *Ma foi!* One has one's dreams at night! . . . Sometimes I dream of a lion springing at me like that!" And he shuddered a little at the depths of his own realism.

A distinguished foreign diplomat who chanced to be stopping at that hotel had, upon a time when he

had seen the bottoms of too many tumblers, come into that room by mistake. The distinguished F. D. had whipped a big revolver from his waistband and backed away hastily with an amazed look of fear and wonder on his face and a string of very lurid curses. Duval laughed again at that memory. But in a minute, he had fallen into succinct talk that took in many things—oxen, for instance, tardily acquired that morning; and the enlistment of a brace of Bechuana " trekkers," and guns, and tinned abominations—talking very rapidly, with enough gestures to fit out a school of elocution. By that time I was beginning to yawn in his face.

Then, declining Duval's proffered *Clicquot,* downstairs and over the way to a quiet little bar for an honest peg, served with a languishing smile by a rosy-cheeked British barmaid. I was a pretty fellow then, it seemed. Then to horse, and back again over very much the same route. It was close upon midnight when I finally drew rein at the gateway of the rambling old stone house where I had quartered myself as a lodger upon the fat and for-ever-beaming Tante Van Salm.

CHAPTER III

A JACK-POT FROM OLD KENTUCKY

A TALL black shadow, monstrous in the moonglow, rose abruptly in front of me and clutched at the bridle. The startled gray reared, but it was only Ingulfa, who had a weird way of turning up when you least expected him. To any one possessed of nerves, the apparition of a bronze colossus rising up apparently out of the earth would have been a shock; but I was used to him. I was used to his size and his mysterious ways. There was one thing I never had quite grown used to, and that was the color of his eyes. They were steel-gray. The effect of those steel-gray eyes, in conjunction with long, straight black hair and a swart complexion, though it was not any darker than an Arab's, was a startling one. It made me think of some miscegenated Berserk.

And the man himself was an impenetrable enigma. He was certainly not an Arab. Neither was he of the Negroid stock, nor of any African race I knew. His skin was not much darker than my own. Any European race, if subjected for five or six centuries to the burning sun of the tropics, would probably darken to that shade in the long run. It was neither

the deep copper-brown hue of the Bantu nor the lighter, cigar-wrapper color of the highland African and the Galla; in fact, it was unlike that of any native I ever saw. There was a smooth light-bronze sheen to it that calls vividly to mind the complexions of the Japanese, as I remember them.

For the rest, he had a very keen, intelligent face of a martial cast, and his steel-gray eyes were like a hawk's for brightness. Apparently he was about thirty years of age. At a good running guess he was at least a foot taller than the stature of an average man, and of tremendously powerful build, with a great chest and arms capable of wielding the hammer of Thor.

When I ran across him, he had been living among the Swahilis—a bastard Arab race who had overrun a great part of East Africa. He had served too, by his own story, among the Arab slave-raiders, the ruthless breed of Tippoo Tib, who recruited their fighting men plausibly enough, as honest traders of ivory—and let them discover their red profession later. He had drifted down from Uganda; had lived for a while at a *kraal* on the Zambesi; to which point, again, he had migrated by degrees from Heaven knew where. But among all these people, his chronic unrest and roving ways had earned for him the significant nickname of the "Wanderer." And a wanderer he was.

So much for the man's strange personnel. But to-night the suddenness of his appearance had upset

me a trifle as he stood there tall and grim in the moonlight.

I rapped out, "What's up, Ingulfa?"

Ingulfa grinned. He was not a person who grinned very often, but I could see him grinning away prodigiously in the bright moonlight. His cavernously grinning jaws suddenly snapped together, then opened again. His voice was a vibrant rumble, keyed low.

"*Effendi,*" he mumbled, "look to yourself! There is one within who has crossed the seas to seek you. Ah, he is a player of ghostly music, this stranger, and between whiles he swears a great deal because you have been so late in coming. A mad fellow, yet he has a look of wisdom. He has brought some strange things: a great two-handed sword—*aho!* Aye, and a thing that mutters in its sleep. . . . Hark, there he is playing again!"

I listened, mystified. Weird strains of wailing music drifted faintly across the courtyard—a strange saturnalia of lost chords. Ghostly and faint, like an echo of the past, that mad music had a familiar ring. Where had I heard it *before?*

Without stopping to rack my memory for the answer, I threw the reins to Ingulfa and mounted swiftly to my rooms, which lay in a wing at the back of that rambling old house. And there in the middle of the room, his feet cocked up on the table, his hands working away at the stops of a very ghastly set of dilapidated Scottish bagpipes with which he

was busied in making the night hideous—the tune was "The Laird of Cockpen"—sat my cousin and only kinsman left alive on top of the earth—Mr. Sheridan Severn, barrister-at-law!

I remembered very well that he had no business to be in Africa; and the family reasons back of it all. His proper place was in England hammering away at his law books. His people had been high-grade, middle-class West-of-England folks; none of your high-flying sort, but improvident; a trifle live-as-you-go; they had left him next to nothing. When he had been orphaned at a wretchedly early age and tossed out in the great world unprovided for, he had come out to live with us in the new colony, dropping into our lives quite as a matter of course, at Port Natal.

It was my father's will that one of us should take up the law as a profession, and my mother had voiced the same wish many times during her lifetime. They had harped upon that one string till it became an old story to me. I hated the sight of barristers' robes, with the dry, musty atmosphere of courtrooms; I wanted to be free. Naturally, its fulfilment had devolved upon Sherry. So he had gone. I believe he had managed to scrape through the University with something or other in his possession that passed for a degree, but of exactly what sort I was not informed. Whether he had ever been able to take chambers for himself, I had not since learned. But just then he happened to look up and caught sight of me standing in the door.

He got up slowly and came toward me with a flushed face. For an instant we stared in silence into each other's eyes, and the next second we were pumping away across the gulf of years.

"You young dog!" I cried. "You here, when you ought to be in England! What does it mean, young 'un? That you have kicked over the traces, I daresay? The old strain of the Severns, my boy; it runs in the blood! Aside from that, you've sprung up like a mushroom, I can see. Why, you look as fit as a prize-fighter, and you're all of fourteen stone!"

"I'm a bit too soft for prize-fighting, but sound as a Berkshire porker," he grinned. "And you too have changed. . . . You've grown to be a handsome pirate, Alan, though I suppose I shouldn't say it to your face. I've known some women foolish enough to fall in love with your sort, while you're an inch too tall to suit me. We shall be styled the 'long and short of it,' I fancy."

I looked at him, almost dazed. The last time I had seen him he was a pale slender youngster of nineteen, standing with a hopeless look in his eyes in the gangway of the *Connaught Castle,* outbound for England. I remember chiefly that he had wrung my hand convulsively without uttering a word of farewell. That was a strange parting. But the pent-up grief in his heart had mastered him, and he was actually stricken dumb. But he had cause enough. He was being packed off to England to

get an education. What was more, he had come on straight to the steamer from my mother's newly-sodded grave.

That was six years before.

And now at twenty-five, he was a well set-up young fellow, small-boned but beautifully muscled, with as fine a chest as you will find in a day's journey, and a biceps you could see playing beneath his coatsleeve when he moved his arm. He was not so tall as might be, but very compactly proportioned; he had wavy dark hair, blue eyes with a glint of gray, and a clean English face. Altogether he was worth while looking at.

"And now," I said, "perhaps you will be good enough to explain where you came from?"

"Came up from the Cape in the old *Achilles*," he answered. "Disembarked at Durban, of course, and came on here, hoping I should find you. Beastly train. . . . Fellow at the Rand Club knew your direction, but was cocksure you had trekked off up-country; and being an accommodating beggar, he drove me out in his beastly 'spider.' But I say, old fellow, magnificent piece of statuary that! He looks like Ajax in bronze!"

He pointed to Ingulfa.

"Where did you get *him?*" he asked with another stare.

"Never mind him just now," I said, "but let me have the whole story. Out with it, my lad."

"Right," he said, sitting down again and re-cock-

ing his feet. "But first permit me to suggest that I'm still gagging on the reek of that blessed train. Man can't talk with a throat like a penny whistle. I hope you don't call this your usual form, when welcoming a long-lost kinsman!"

"There is some Cape Smoke," I suggested.

"Trot it out," he shuddered.

I found the Cape brandy, steering warily through the amazing litter of his luggage strewn about the floor. A huge bag of golf-sticks lay jumbled with gun-cases, boxes, and a weird little Berliner gramophone, whose frozen drone had startled Ingulfa. Hard by lay an object which caused me to pull up short and stare at it with open-minded suspicion. It was a long two-handed Scottish claymore; and Heaven only knew where it had come from and how many men's blood its grim blade had drunk in its forgotten past!

He had always gone in for relics—particularly the warlike kind. I remembered very lucidly how in attempting to discharge an ancient firearm, which had belonged to a famous highwayman who was duly hanged for his crimes, he had narrowly missed blowing me to kingdom-come, for the thing had burst from the effects of the heavy charge. So I took care to make a wary detour around that sinister relic of bygone battles, which lay quite naked on the floor, for most of Sherry's curios had developed diabolical proclivities.

"Hung out my shingle all fair enough," he said

over the top of his tumbler, "and stuck to my bally ten-by-eight for weeks on end—but no one ever came. . . . Unique experience, 'pon my honor! It made me think I needed a change of pasture, as the poet insinuates, so I've come back to Africa. Still sport the same old shingle." And he pointed to an oblong piece of japanned tin nailed to the lid of one of his boxes. It bore the legend:

MR. SHERIDAN SEVERN
Barrister-at-Law

"I'll hang it up again out here," he sighed. "Not overly many sharks of my kidney adrift here just now, I fancy?"

"An error in the log," I amended. "You'll find plenty of sharks in these waters, my lad—schools of 'em. They'll eat you at sight, as they've eaten everything else. But let that pass. You are here, old fellow; that's enough for me. Now have you got any money?"

For answer, he pulled out a bulging wallet.

"There is six hundred pounds in that wad. Mark that little word—wad. Only had a fifty-pound-note in the world when I hit the saloon deck of the *Achilles*. Note that expression, hit; Yankee slang for 'arrive.' Behold, I have made a killing—ah! I see you are beginning to observe the red-blooded novelty of my flow of speech. Plagiarisms! Got

them off a party of Americans coming up from the Cape. I had opined that mere language was a hackneyed convention until I met those Americans! I've changed my views, it is a joy forever. But that wasn't all, Alan!"

Abruptly, with a juggling gesture he tossed the wallet ceilingward. It fell back solidly in the center of the table and burst open. A little stream of broad golden eagles slid out clinking. Banknotes, bulked into a disrespectful pulp, protruded cheerfully.

"No," he said, "that wasn't all!"

His eyes had narrowed as if, in that brief instant, he had seen behind the solid door of the present that shut him in.

"Alan, I met *the* woman—the one, I mean, that I am going to care for—where I got the plagiarisms and the six hundred pounds."

My eyes bulged as I got up and gasped feebly, "But how the deuce——"

He waved me down.

"Now don't cut in on this, Alan, old chap. Where was I? Ah, yes, on the saloon deck of the *Achilles!* It was raining big guns when I went on board at Cape Town after transhipping from the Union Castle steamer. I shouldn't have minded the rain, you know, only the wind was blowing half a gale on deck, so I strolled down below for a smoke. There I presently got in the way of speaking to some American globe-trotters bound for the Mozambique

Channel. There were three men in the party, besides two ladies—regular stunners they were, but more especially the younger one, who struck me as altogether too handsome to be comfortable. I found out that they were going across to Madagascar to do Queen Ranavalona and her dusky court, which is the biggest order in the globe-trotting game.

"Meantime the weather stayed bad; in fact it rained and blew all the time coming up, and I soon got well acquainted with the saloon deck. It wasn't long before my Yankee friends took up the matter of my education. It began with a thing they called a mint julep, and ended with my being initiated into the great American game of poker. I wasn't so keen to play, but they made a great favor of my joining them; said the game was no good three-handed, and wouldn't I sit in to oblige? Naturally, I hated to seem a bounder. I hadn't a pea-green notion of the game, but there was a reason amidships making it impolitic to decline. If you care to know, the Reason wore skirts. . . . So I sat in.

"And an odd game it was. Once you began, you simply couldn't stop. You wouldn't if you could, you know. There was one old chap who seemed to be the king bee of the lot. 'Majah Buckerton, from old Kentuck, suh!'—he raised tobacco somewhere in the States. I could see with one eye shut that he had a habit of raising things, for he raised the pot with surprising regularity. They called them 'pots,' you know. Now a pot is mostly open, isn't

it? But these pots were different; they had metaphorical lids, and one had to open them. There were things I didn't quite take in. After you opened them, you raised them. The Major mostly looked after that. I asked him if there was any limit to that sort of thing. He said, 'The limit, suh, is the ceiling!' That was another thing I didn't quite grasp. But I opened a good many pots myself, and as luck would have it, invariably won. It seemed as though I couldn't lose.

"The pile of notes and gold in front of me kept getting bigger, and meanwhile the old Major kept getting madder. But by this time my blood was up. At last I got an opportunity to open the biggest stakes of all, and the Major, as usual, began to shovel in banknotes, saying that he raised me. I had an odd sort of hand but I 'stayed,' as they called it—queer expression that, for I was there all the time—and then I pushed in some more money and asked the Major how many cards he needed. He said he guessed that what he had would do him pretty well; anyhow he would keep 'em. I took one card myself and made another bet of fifty pounds. Then the old Major looks at me sort of pityingly out of the tail of his eye, and says:

"'My boy, I don't like to bump you too strong, but to me, suh, you represent the British lion, and therefaw I shall twist yo' tail. For the honor of old Kentuck, suh, I am compelled to raise you one thousand dollars!' And he shoveled in the money.

"I just pushed in all the notes in front of me—and a jolly pile they were—and asked the Major to show his hand. I knew it would be a stunner, but there was really nothing else to be done.

"'Three aces with a pair of kings, suh!' says he, laying them down on the table with their faces up. 'I suppose you have me beaten then, Major,' says I, 'for I've only two pairs.' He began to rake in the money, and my precious fifty-pound-note with it. 'Live and learn, my son!' There was a general laugh. I stared at him slowly across the table. 'Oddly enough,' says I, 'they're all knaves—four knaves.'

"'Four knaves!' suddenly says the Major, quite staggered. 'Four *what?*' 'Four knaves,' I said, 'and had them all the time, by Jove.' I laid them down face up on the table. Then the old Major let go of those banknotes as if they burned his fingers. 'Gentlemen,' says he, 'there are five Jacks here—I am the fifth! And I take this opportunity to apologize for my bray. Take your money, young man; you have won—won, don't you understand? . . . Take it; it's yours! Gentlemen, there is no fool like an old fool!'

"It was all theatric. Somehow it didn't seem right. I said, 'Major, so far as I am concerned, this is all a mistake. I don't want this money; it isn't mine. Will you take it back?' He cut me off like a flash. 'From another, suh,' he said icily,

'your offer might be an insult. Say no more. Take what is your right, suh; you have won it fairly.' One of the other men spoke up. 'Take it, Johnny Bull, and don't lose any sleep over it. It's only a Jackpot from old Kentucky!' Then they all laughed like mad.

"I raked it in.

"'Will you drink a mint julep with us, suh?' the Major asked. I said I would. When it was all over we went in to breakfast. That evening as I stood by the rail, the handsome lady came up to me, and gave me a lovely smile. 'Mr. Severn,' says she, 'you have put a crimp in the Major that he isn't likely to forget in a hurry, which means that you have rendered us all a service. He needed it, you see, and now he'll be good. Take my advice, forget the great American game; it's bad medicine. You may come and talk to me instead, if you wish, for I imagine the men find your society expensive.'

"I took her at her word, and the next day but one we anchored in Durban Roads. We said good-by —I had sat by that girl in a trance for two whole days—and I came ashore; but before we parted, in the upshot, she gave me a word of hope. 'We're coming back,' she said, 'to do the diamond fields. Don't forget. . . .'

"'Forget!' I whispered to her. 'When the stars go out and the sea dries up—then I'll forget!' I went over the side. She looked back at me and

smiled. It haunts me, that smile, as no smile ever did! Forget!" He broke off abruptly. "When they come back——"

"They never will," I said unfeelingly; "they never do. But let me at least congratulate you on being a fool for luck." I picked up the wallet as I spoke. "As for this, it had better be placed in safety until we decide what is to be done now that you are here in Africa. For the present, what do you say to having a go at lions for a month or so up-country?"

His face lit up with pleasure.

"As my Yankee friends would put it," he cried, dropping his heels to the floor with a crash that made the glasses rattle again, "I'm your cockleburr! I suppose Ajax there goes with us? When shall we trek?"

"At dawn," I answered; and just then Ingulfa glided out of the room at the lowing of oxen from the rear. At the threshold he turned and faced us, and the lamp-light, flaring up brightly with the draft of the open door, threw his great form and martial face into strong relief. Then the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER IV

INGULF THE SECOND

WHY one man looks into another's eyes and quails, or what he sees there, who can say? It is one of life's paradoxes that one man is a walking riddle, another an open page. Ingulfa's weird personality left a remarkable impression upon people who saw him for the first time. His singularity was mystery; and the glamour of his mystery hung over him like an invisible ægis. I had seen men stop and gulp in wonder when he had come suddenly into the room; yet I was unprepared for the look of intense curiosity, almost of fear, that crept into Sherry's eyes as the door closed behind him.

"Man," he said, "where did you get that big bronze devil? Who is he, what is he, and where did he come from? I have my reasons for asking," he added. "As you may recall, ethnography happens to be a hobby of mine—the races and lairs of men. . . . You may smile as much as you like, but I don't believe that man is any more a native than you or I!"

He paused. "There is another reason," he said. "He reminds me of a queer yarn I heard from a scientific London friend of mine who is a famous

linguist and an inveterate globe-trotter, something he got out of the old Norse Sagas. I will explain what that was by and by. But be kind enough to tell me what African race that person belongs to?"

"I can't tell you that," I answered, "for I don't know. I can tell you where I ran across him. He answers to the name of Ingulfa."

He gave a start. "Just say that again."

I complied, rather mystified.

"So that's his blooming name—'Ingulfa!' Well, it tallies. . . . 'Ingulf-a!'" he reëchoed, hyphenating the word. "Are you getting your grappling-irons onto that hyphen?" he asked significantly. "Now be good enough to hand me Dougall MacDougall's claymore, which you will find just back of your chair. I have it in my mind that I shall part company with it forever in the next quarter of an hour," and he sighed.

I hastily moved my chair and picked up the claymore, though what he meant to do with it was beyond me. But out of sheer curiosity I had another look at it. At a glance, I saw it was the familiar type of Scottish broadsword commonly known as "two-handed." It was a long, formidable-looking weapon, and as sharp as the day it came from the forge. Whoever it was that tempered the steel had been a master of his craft. The scabbard was badly dinted and worn, but had once been handsome, being hung on a broad leather belt by fine steel chains. The blade of the weapon itself was made of the very

best steel, beautifully damascened, although it bore so far as I could see no mark of the maker. It was double-edged, very long and broad, and so heavy as to appear rather ponderous and unwieldy; but in the right hands, looked capable of dealing great blows and withstanding almost any strain. Obviously, it was made about the time of Wallace or Bruce for some champion of uncommon stature and strength, for no one else could have wielded such a weapon.

"Who was Dougall MacDougall?" I asked.

"A swashbuckling chap who lived four hundred years ago and died with his boots on," he replied abstractedly. "He killed six bold English knights with that sword at the battle of Flodden Field; but at last an English archer in the army of the Earl of Surrey laid him low with a cloth-yard shaft. But I am ready to listen now, so fire away. Where was it you ran across your henchman with the hyphenated name?"

"Well," I began, "it was while I was shooting with Lord Melton near the Zambesi Falls." And I went on to tell him how one day we had got in the wake of the Arab slave-raiders who had made that region a human hell. For once they met their match when a Matabele Impi, who were out on a cattle-lifting foray of their own, had attacked their camp at dawn. The Matabele had evidently outnumbered them tremendously—it was "dog eat dog." In the sanguinary fray that followed, this man Ingulfa had been left for dead on the field. Like the Matabele

and the Swahili mercenaries, he had fought with the spear. He had fought on the losing side; unheeded and ignorant of that ignoble cause.

The slavers had died hard—each man lying stark and still in the center of a knot of dead foes on the hilltop where they made their last stand. As I gazed down wonderingly at this other Hereward, only in bronze, lying all caked with a bloody rime—hopeless; with a ring of dead men all round him, and slowly ebbing his life away through a great gaping hole in his chest, though it may seem like a Quixotic thing to say, I could not leave him alone to die. So I drove away the vultures, that were beginning to grow bold by now, and had him carried to the wagon, where he could die, at least, in peace. But as the poor devil appeared to die hard, I resolved to try my hand at some impromptu surgery. So I washed out the wound as well as I could, and sewed it up myself after a fashion.

The day wore through, and he had not died yet. At nightfall I put on fresh bandages and added a healing infusion made from a stunted herb which grows wild on the *veld,* and is useful to apply to cuts and wounds. An old witch-wife at Secombo's *kraal* had told me that weed would cure anybody but a dead body, and she may have been in the right about it, for, to my amazement, he began to mend. In the upshot, strangely enough, his magnificent constitution pulled him through.

When the time came to trek down to the coast, I told him that he might return to his own *kraal* whenever he was ready, but he merely saluted in silence.

"'What is it?' I asked him.

"'Englishman,' he said in short, soldierly fashion, 'the war-dogs left me on the field. You found me and healed my hurt. Henceforth I fight your battles, not mine. Look you, I am an eagle who has lost his eyrie, and a stranger from another time. . . . Men call me the "Wanderer," and I am a wanderer indeed! These Swahili are not of my race, though I fought for them because fighting is a man's game. And so I wander on till I find what I seek. Where will the road end that I must follow? *Effendi,* I don't know. But I will wander a while in your shadow.'

"'The deuce you will!' said I. But I caved in, for the man's strange trick of speech, which was so utterly unlike that of all the natives I had ever heard, had taken me very much aback."

"Precisely!" Sherry put in. "It must have taken any one aback, except some chap like Kipling, who sees into the insides of men's souls but has lost track of the year. And now have you noticed his eyes?"

"I have, and I expected that question."

"Well, what do you make of them?"

"I don't know. I am all at sea. They are certainly not like any native's eyes. But suppose you

question him in person. If I am not mistaken—he walks light for so big a man—he is coming down the corridor."

I was right, for at this moment Ingulfa glided into the room. "Listen, Ingulfa," I said, "this man is of my father's house. When you fight his foes you fight mine. He comes from a great city yonder across the water where men make many books and put into them the records of men's deeds and the faces of many nations. And so they judge the race by the deeds and faces. He wants to know from what stock you spring?"

A light of understanding flashed across Ingulfa's martial face.

"Tell him," he said, "that I am of a race as proud as his own."

"But what race is that, Ingulfa?"

"A race that came out of the North in ships when the world was young. . . . But if I ever heard their name it has gone from my memory. That is all I know, Englishmen."

"Ah!" said Sherry, with a singular smile, "let us try an experiment, a little bizarre, to be sure, but not so new that it has not been used before. Man, this thing is big—bigger than I thought."

It *was* big. To this day I remember the attitudes of those two; Ingulfa standing arrested at the threshold, flashing his steel-gray eyes from one to the other of us in his inscrutable way, and facing him, his chair tilted to the wall, Sherry sitting with the great

sword across his knees. He had the air of having something up his sleeve; something preposterously simple. I can recall their very facial expressions; the shadows, the light of the flaring oil lamp that flickered on that gleaming blade, on the blued metal of a rack of guns on the wall, on the amazing jumbled miscellany of rubbish littered all over the room. The place was like some backstairs London curio-shop in Cheapside.

"Now tell him this. In the other land men laugh at a fighting man who is armed with a plaything like the spear. I have brought him a better weapon from across the seas," and he tapped the broadsword meaningly.

Rising, he sheathed the claymore and abruptly handed it to Ingulfa with a graphic gesture.

"I give it to you," he said, "to have and to hold forever!"

"Now watch results," he whispered *sotto voce*.

I watched, and saw Ingulfa, like a man in a daze, step back a pace and mechanically slide his hand down over the hilt of his new weapon—saw his fingers grip and tighten, and saw his face begin to work. Then he unsheathed it. I never saw anything quite like the light that came into his eyes in that moment, and yet it was no evil glitter. I marked him kiss the cold blade like one who has come into his own. He began to brandish the murderous-looking thing above his head.

It was a sinister sight, and yet there was something

inspiring in the way he did it all. Suddenly he broke off and began to mutter. I listened, for this thing of making a man feel his past—no, not even his own past but the past of his ancestors, was beginning to fascinate me tremendously. But it was all in some barbaric jargon that was utterly incomprehensible to me. Somehow it sounded strangely like a chant.

I said, "You have touched the Lost Chord."

"Hush!" he answered warningly. "Let it vibrate!"

Ingulfa had glided abruptly into the Swahili tongue and I pricked up my ears.

"A man's tool!" he muttered; "he is right. Tell him I accept the gift," and his voice rose—"a wizard's gift, a great gift, a gladdener of vultures, feeder of hyenas, mightiest of weapons my eyes have ever seen! Hail to the Skull-biter!" he cried suddenly, his voice rising like a trumpet-blare. "Hail to you, Destroyer, forged long ago by enchanters from across the seas! Death rides on your glittering wing; where you bite, skeletons shall lie bleaching in the sun! Now I am a man once more! . . . *Aho!* it shall drink deep; it shall drink deep!"

"Now what on earth is he saying?" asked Sherry, grinning triumphantly. "Why, it sounds for all the world like a Viking's chant!"

Then a great light dawned on me. "A Viking's chant it is," I said, "and he is a sort of lost Viking himself, or a wonderfully good imitation. All he

lacks is a ship. But you—you are a clever young devil, and you have made me see things."

"But what was that he was chanting?" he cried.

"He has been christening his new plaything as you expected he would, with a string of pet names pleasantly suggestive of a charnel-house. Rely upon it, he would not trade that butcher's tool for a barrel of diamonds; and what is more to the point, you have builded better than you knew. If ever he can stand between you and fate he will do it."

"Well, I may give him the chance some day. But let us be sure we hold the true key to the cipher. Suppose you ask him to favor us with another little speech—in the other tongue."

I complied, and Ingulfa began speaking, or rather chanting something in the same barbaric jargon we had heard before, but he broke off abruptly at the fourth line as though his memory failed him.

"Ask him now what that means."

I asked accordingly. "He says it means this:

> "I am a landless one;
> Reiver and Wanderer,
> Homeless and masterless;
> We are Sons of the Sea . . ."

Sherry rose to his feet. "Let us put off the mask," he said. "That man is a Viking, or the son of a Viking, and his name is Ingulf, not 'Ingulfa.' The latter is only a corruption of a good old Norse name, an Africanism, so to speak. That is where

the hyphen comes in. And that tongue he has just been babbling is in all probability archaic Scandinavian!"

I sat up and gasped.

"I have heard," I said, "of a gentleman of fiction named Dupin who unraveled some tall problems, but in my humble opinion Dupin was a fool to you. And now, since you have floated me clean off ground, perhaps you will explain how our Viking comes to be living in Africa, with an African tailpiece to his name?"

He replied, "That leads us to the other land—to my globe-trotting London friend and to the Saga of Ull the Old."

"The 'Saga of Ull the Old,'" I repeated in wonder; "who in the Lord Harry was he?"

"You shall hear," he said, unlocking a black despatch-box which contained his degrees, and presently bringing to light a paper covered with writing in an extraordinarily crabbed hand. "Here is a good translation of that amazing fragment which Dr. Eric Ivarsson has obligingly set down with his own learned hand, for I was much taken up with the matter at the time. Fortunately, I have preserved it. The original writing has been placed in the British Museum by my friend, who, by the way, carries about half of the alphabet after his name. But as that gentleman's precious script is a shining example of the illegible—like that of most geniuses—I had best read it aloud."

He began accordingly:

"'I, Ull the Old, the son of Eyulf, the son of Eric Long-spear, write of these things whereof my knowledge is that of him who has seen. In this my "Say" (Saga) I set down what befell those who followed the whale's path, four long ships and many renowned Berserks under leadership of Ingulf Blackhair. Ill-fated was that voyage, for of all who sailed but nineteen men are home, of whom I, Ull' (&c, &c) 'am one. For, hearing from certain sea-faring men of Krit' (the island of Crete) 'that the Varangers, whom we had hoped to join, were disbanded and scattered to the four winds, we turned back and fell to ravaging the coast of Ethiopia. There we got much booty, with certain white female slaves that fell to the share of our leaders, and fought a great fight with an Ethiopian army which came against us, wherein we had the best of it, escaping seaward with small loss. Odin sent a storm; it drave the ships onto the rocks, where they broke up. Now having no ships and being cut off to the north by the Ethiopian army, we marched southward across the narrow neck of the two seas, and seized there some ships of the Arabian, killing the crews to a man. We ran south on that sea' (the Red Sea?) 'before heavy gales. In the outcome, being new to those waters and the vessels we had seized being of a pattern unfamiliar to our seamen, we were washed in and ground to pieces. Some perished there, but most came safely off to land. Seeing no escape by water we turned inland, seeking some other outlet, until in time, wearied of wandering, we came to a fine fertile country ringed in by great mountains, and here settled, taking as many wives as we listed from among the women of the Blacks. Of these mountains there is one that vomits smoke and has from afar off the semblance of a monstrous skull. Two years I dwelled

in the shadow of Skull-Mountain; but in the end I with some few others, a ship's crew in all, hungering for the sea, parted from our companions and marched down to the coast, which journey occupied the third of a year. There we built a seaworthy vessel of the wreckage that was washed in——'"

Here he came to a full stop.

"Another March of the Ten Thousand," I put in. "Our old friends, Xenophon & Co., with a new *libretto.*" But he made no reply. He was staring moodily at nothing, with a very blank look on his face.

"Go on," I said, much interested; but he had sprung up and was striding to and fro across the floor, almost wringing his hands. Coming back abruptly to the table, he thrust the writing under my nose.

"See for yourself!"

The Saga broke off short, leaving everything in the dark.

At the bottom was the date of the translation, Aug. 6, 1893, and the translator's half illegible initials—E. I. That was all, with the exception of a short quotation from an old Norman romance, scrawled in the upper left-hand margin in the same crabbed hand. It ran:

Est fuga, volvitur rota,
On we drift: where looms the dim port?
— *Hugues of Saxe-Gotha.*

"According to my learned friend," he said, "whose name adorns the title-page of several notable monographs on the Norse Literature, that was the extent of his find. He never found the other half of the Saga. An unrecorded landshift had buried the galleries which ran below the ancient *tumuli* under a mass of débris that blocked the way of any further search. 'The remainder is lost to the world!' that was how he put it. 'It seems incredible to most people,' he had said to me back there in the smoke and fog of London, 'that the Vikings could have made their way into Africa; but in point of fact, history proves that they visited Africa repeatedly even at a very remote period,' and then he wound up pat with a passage he had bagged from the Latin of Eumenius,* telling how a band of sea-kings who had made a landing upon the Libyan coast near ancient Carthage, had been driven back to their ships by the Carthaginians coming up. That was in the year 300 A. D. The man was a perfcet mine of information. He told me all about the Varangians, and Miklagard—that was Constantinople—and the Greek emperors; and he fixed the date of Ull's voyage in the thirteenth century, which he says was the time the Varangian Guard disbanded. 'The coast of the Dark Continent,' he chirped into my ear, 'was well known to the Norse sea-rovers!'"

"But what did he say became of 'Ingulf Black-

* Eumenius: Panegyr., XVIII.—EDITOR.

hair'?" I asked. Before Sherry could reply, there came a strange interruption.

"He stayed!" a deep voice muttered behind me, "and built a kingdom. He stayed; aye, and I with him! We made war; and we slew, we slew——"

I craned my head around, and there was Ingulf, to give him his right name, whose presence we had forgotten absolutely, mumbling like a ghost in a play. It never struck me as odd that he was gabbling away in English, for he spoke it well enough when he chose. He made blood-curdling gestures. I was seized with awe. What did he know of the other Ingulf, that "Ingulf Blackhair" who had set sail for Constantinople more than six centuries before? The old creed of the East flashed into my brain. Was he Ingulf's reincarnation? He gabbled mostly to himself. There was a dreadful realism about it all. "By the Mountain of the Skull! The accursed priests! The Ethiopians— *Aho!* the Black Men came rolling up like the sea-waves. We broke them —*so*. Ah, we broke them, and then we slew! Who calls to Ingulf, Ingulf the Wanderer, Ingulf the Berserk, Ingulf Blackhair? He is dead! I saw him die in battle. . . . I saw—or was it I?"

He swept his hand over his forehead with a gesture of immense despair; his voice died away to a mere rattle. An appalling shudder shook him. The dead glare in his eyes was awful. I was struck with horror. I thought he would fall; when all at

once, amazingly, he pulled himself together and glided out of the room.

Sherry burst out when he was gone: "Man, I believe he was *there!*" He began to mop his face nervously in a most unbarrister-like way. Then in a gasp—"Great Heavens, *what* is that man?"

"I give it up," I said. "The old sea-king's descendant, or else——" I shivered. "Remember the writing speaks of 'certain white female slaves.'"

The pale glow of the dawn was streaming through the windows as we rose. A brand-new day was being heralded by the muffled beat of the Bonanza stamps, falling on the morning's peace like the roll of muttered thunder. An ox began to low from some out-houses in the rear—it seemed to come from miles away—reminding me that it was time for many things that were urgent, for many perils; for trek-oxen, gun-bearers, wild sounds, and naked men; for rivers and the burning glare of deserts; for mountains that never seemed any nearer, though you journeyed to-day and to-morrow; for adventure, toil, thirst, fever; for gold to be earned or lost, for life to be staked again and kept, or thrown away.

It was time to "trek."

PART SECOND

SEVERN'S FOLLY

CHAPTER V

THE "NEW JERUSALEM"

ALL treks come to an end prefigured, even the little trek that is life. For Duval, the two had ended together, and we had left him there in his lonely grave up-country, with a grim stone monolith keeping a long ward over his bones. Some eleven weeks from that evil time found us back again on the Rand. After drawing up a joint statement of the manner of his passing to a better world—and a harrowing document was that—and having duly taken oath of its truth, we went straight from the magistrate's office to the grimy den of the *Johannesburg Star*, and told a tale which caused the hollow-jowled editor to sit up and write things with headlines. After that, we repaired to the cable offices and sent off this message:

To the Marquis de Roquemort — Paris.

René Duval was killed by a lion in Khama's country, January 1st. Remains buried on the spot. Cable disposition of effects.

Alan Severn.

Afterward, we betook ourselves to the Rand Club, to sip consoling liquids and overlook upon the cosmo-

politan human tide which washes through the streets of the latter-day Jerusalem of gold. A carriage was passing by at the moment, drawn by a pair of striking grays in silver-mounted harness, and conveying two ladies—of apparel Worthian and unobtrusively fetching; of faces serenely radiant. In that day of the ubiquitous "spider," an out-and-out carriage, while by no means an unknown sight in the streets of the big gold town, was still a thing sufficiently uncommon; but this telling equipage was the focus of every stare. It was Johannesburg's not too delicate tribute to beauty; a pardonable form of flattery, since that pair of beauties might have been safely backed to draw a stare in a London crowd. One was a superb statuesque creature of dazzling bright hair and pink-and-white complexion; nobly coiffured; worthily begowned; a composite of Paris *chic,* British poise, and Yankee self-assertiveness, with emphasis on the last: the other—Norma!

"Norma!" The name had burst involuntarily from my lips as I bent forward, staring. But she had not seen me. Her eyes were fixed upon something at the horses' heads: a naked Kaffir urchin who had narrowly missed going under those iron-shod hoofs in an ill-advised scurry across the street. All I caught was a glimpse of a well remembered profile. But to my intense surprise, the bright-haired lady, whom I had never seen before, looked up and bowed with precision.

Sudden enlightenment was vouchsafed from Sherry. He had risen and was beaming rapturously upon the blonde goddess in the carriage, coupling recognition with the delighted avowal:

"My Angel from 'old Kentucky'!"

We bowed together. Both ladies were nodding and smiling. The carriage had stopped, and the Angel was unmistakably beckoning, at which we beamed in unison and strolled down, leaving green-eyed envy writ large upon the faces of a little coterie of smokers strung along the balcony. We passed them with preternatural unconcern, conscious of a secret fear that the enchanted vehicle would evaporate. But it stood by its guns, grays pawing and coachman sawing, as we found when we had emerged upon the street.

The riddle of the bright-haired divinity's presence was quickly solved when Norma informed us succinctly:

"We are old acquaintances, you know. It was Paris, of course—we met there. . . . Miss Buckerton's trip to the Wonderful Isle has made her ill, and she is staying here with me to recuperate. The others have gone on to Kimberley."

"Bless me, now!" said Sherry. "A most remarkable-looking invalid!"

Both ladies laughed. "She is convalescent." And Norma turned to me. "So you are back at last from the 'unforeseen'?"

"*We* are," I said significantly; "that is, we two. One of us—stayed. There was a lioness. . . ."

The other two were swimming in seas of chatter.

She looked at me very gravely; a searching look, for all that her eyes had softened with womanly commiseration. "That is not good to hear," she said. "And it was René Duval who stayed? I had met him and I am very sorry. Forgive me if I ask the eternal question, 'Whose fault was it?'"

I bit back the answer, "His own," which had trembled on the tip of my tongue and replied instead: "I cannot say. It was a deplorable accident."

She said simply, "I should like to hear that story. Can you bring your cousin and dine with us tomorrow? Don't refuse; your lioness has become a very dreadful anticipation."

"It is impossible to refuse." Subconsciously, I heard Sherry saying to the Angel:

"And how did you find Her Majesty, Queen Ranavalona III?"

Her answer was characteristic. "Quite as usual, thank you, suffering with her coffee complexion."

"And her royal Consort and Grand Vizier, all rolled in one?"

The Angel scored again in her rippling drawl.

"A 'dark gentleman' in resplendent attire, who gabbled his polite nigger-French and ogled a great ogle!"

"So the 'king' ogled?" he said, amused. "Well, I can't say that I blame him much. At least, the beggar showed taste. A cat may look at a Queen, and even a Hova will blink upon occasion at a great white light. Yon vizierman has my ungrudged sympathy, let him be blood-brother to the Ace of Spades! But doubtless there are further details? May I ask when I shall be permitted to hear them?"

But the Angel turned to Norma and their eyes met in a rapid telepathic exchange. No spoken word passed between them; yet she bent over him again and murmured clearly, "That—is arranged."

He laughed; the answer was so quietly naïve.

"Then it was witchcraft!" he threw back, but she smiled dismissal.

The carriage vanished upon the uneven tenor of its way, and we sauntered back to our balcony. We had booked our passage to a brand-new Elysium. Then the men at the farther end, most of whom I knew inconveniently well, swarmed down on us in a body, the green god visibly predominant in their faces. He in advance of their line, a cadaverous gentleman immaculately attired, was Tilstone, of the "Glencairn Deep," and he opened fire remorselessly.

"It seems," was his first broadside, "that one must be a lion-killer to become a lion! No other

need apply. Should he chance to be a person who has made a fortune in low-grade ores and tailings, the romantic fair one will have none of him on that count, or if he be one who has made two fortunes in a pinched-out reef she snubs him twice for that. In any case, he's a dead card. The moral is, get hence and pot lions!"

Tilstone made us an ironic bow.

"Would either of you chaps care to borrow any money—on your expectations?"

I saw my opportunity to draw his teeth and avert impending raillery, and I held up my hand.

"Gentlemen—" quoth I, "—and Tilstone. Not so very long back, we left on the other side of the Limpopo River two things, a dead lioness and a dead man. Exactly twenty weeks ago, that man—a finer gentleman never lived—sat in this chair. . . . Which of you would care to sleep by his side to-night?"

We left a glum-faced group in possession of our empty chairs, and went.

That conversation bore portentous fruit, for it is part of the scheme of life that little things produce results in astonishing disproportion to their relative importance. A splendid dream had obsessed me, born of those chance words of Tilstone's, and lighting my thoughts like sunlit tracery gilding the most prosaic casements. Perhaps the light would die, the traceries flicker and go and the dream never come true. But Tilstone had made a fortune out of low-

grade ores, and his half mocking words had set me thinking. In Johannesburg all roads led to gold. And with gold, much gold, all things were possible, even the House of Raylescroft! Why should not we too take our share of this golden toll, in a land whose richness was a proverb?

"I wonder," I asked Sherry, "how much hard cash, if put to it, we could show between the pair of us?"

He answered after a little reflection: "You may put me down for a matter of six hundred pounds, say seven hundred if you choose to count my share of our little annuity, which, as it chances, falls due to-day for the quarter."

"And I," I supplemented, "can bring that up to a couple of thousands, not counting poor Duval's five hundred for the trip. We'll leave *that* out of the reckoning."

"Not so bad, after all," he remarked. "And now just what are you driving at?"

"Gold mines; something to make money fast."

"By all means let us make money fast. Shall we look over the market now or wait for something to turn up?"

"We'll begin to-day," I said. "It's no good waiting for things to turn up; they never turn up on time."

Something did turn up on the very next day. It was noised around the curb that a German Jew named Steinhardt who was returning to the Father-

land in the matter of some estates, owned a valuable mine which he was forced to sell for a song. When this rumor got about, as such things will, we decided to look into it.

In front of the Stock Exchange we came upon Steinhardt himself, who was displaying to a lot of men some specimens of rich ore obtained from his mine. He was short and undersized, but upon his sloping shoulders was set an enormous head, the great, glistening pate perfectly bald, save where a thin but kinky fringe of sparse iron-gray locks jutted out tragically at the sides. His nose was formed uncommonly like a great fish-hook, and the ends of his eyebrows slanted upward instead of curving down.

He made gloomy Hebraic gestures. Listening, we were informed that his property comprised a compact area of forty-eight claims in the South Village Extension, some five miles out of Johannesburg. The average mine on the Rand takes in at least one hundred claims, but this was quite as large a slice as we could think of attempting to digest with our limited capital. A shaft had already been sunk, it appeared from his talk, and boreholes put down to a depth of seven hundred feet; further than this the property had not been developed, but a quantity of working machinery would go with the mine, including a diamond drill.

Old Steinhardt, with his pronounced racial gestures, reeled all this off monotonously, like a som-

nambulist. But ready cash was none too free in that knot of curb brokers, and he would take nothing else. Offers of scrip in many mines were temptingly dangled under his great hook nose. At these he laughed sardonically. We watched and listened to this extraordinary-looking personage for a brief while, and then catching his eye, I drew him aside from the press, and bluntly inquired the price of the mine.

"Fifteen hoondert poundts," was the gloomy answer; "not a *pfennig* less! To Berlin I must go upon great matters, *Herr,* or I should sell it never —never at all. Fifteen hoondert poundts——"

"Too cursed much!" I said shortly, and had turned on my heel when a thought struck me. "Why are you leaving this country?" I asked suspiciously.

"*Herren,*" he said, "an order of Fate! You think me a common Jew of the Transvaal, *nicht wahr?*" A look of gloomy disdain swept across his hawk face. "You think so—*hein?*" He took a pace to the curb, swelled forth his chest, like a pigeon, clicked his heels once, and wheeled short. Pride, triumph, contempt, came into his sardonic eyes. "Listen: the Baron von Steinhardt, that was my father. My mother was a peasant—handsome! . . . I haf her portrait. A segret marriage . . . not published. *Die Dorfschulmeisterin.* . . The eldest son. . . . Proofs! . . . I—the Baron by order of Fate! Fifteen hoondert poundts——"

"And beastly steep, to be sure," I broke in, "but we'll have a peek into your shaft to-day."

With that we left him.

In two hours we were down in the shaft of the Jew's mine, marking with eyes that glittered the thin veins of dull yellow with which the reef was shot in places, like the veins in a man's arm. With the surface outcroppings they would have satisfied the most skeptical. After drawing apart for a whispered conference, from which old Steinhardt was brazenly frozen out, we decided that we must have the mine at all hazards.

"Look here," I said boldly to Steinhardt, "you want too much for your blooming sell, but we have decided to give you a thousand, and not a shilling more."

"A thousand!" he screamed; "you are *vericht*—crazy!"

I snapped my fingers at him.

"A thousand pounds; take it or leave it."

His jaw dropped in melancholy despair. He waved eloquent Hebraic palms at the shaft we had just left.

"*Gott im Himmel!*" he wailed, wagging his great head tragically to and fro; "what a barbarian! These English! . . . a price like that!" He was almost in tears. "And an order of Fate! A Baron! I—Steinhardt! . . ." He went on muttering: "Berlin! The Emperor! What shall I do? *Teufelsgelt!*"—he wrung his hands. With his lugubrious eyes, his fish-hook nose, his fringe of

tragic hair, in his extravagant emotion, he looked so ridiculous that I could have burst out laughing in his face. "Ah, Devil-gold! . . ." It wasn't ludicrous to him.

Suddenly his head sunk down.

"God!" he mumbled, "to-day a poor Transvaaler Jew; to-morrow——" He made two or three steps away from us, clicked his heels and drew himself up, with squared shoulders and swelling chest, and halted dead.

"You shall take it for a thousand poundts!"

He fished from a capacious wallet a bill of sale in blank, and—shrewd old Shylock!—a stylographic pen. He filled it in slowly and with immense deliberation, presenting a melancholy spectacle. While we were affixing our names he groaned horribly like one in pain. And afterward, we cantered back to the city, stopping in Commissioner Street at the Bank of Africa, where I drew out the money. Before paying it over, we took a precaution. A notary's sign swinging above some windows had caught my eye; and here we entered and had the sale duly attested and a deed of the mine made out in our joint name.

Steinhardt gathered up the notes with one sweep of a long white hand, crushed them swiftly and spasmodically in his palm as one would crush a serpent, and gloomily prepared to depart.

"Stop a bit, my friend," I interposed. "It is not

every day that one does business with a Baron. Shall we not adjourn elsewhere and crack a bottle to your future fortunes with the Emperor?"

But old Steinhardt, contemptuously declining our proffered cheer, turned away and rode off slowly on his sorry nag, shaking his head dolefully meanwhile and muttering into his beard. His hat having been removed while he mopped a perspiring brow, his enormous bald pate shone exactly like pink porcelain-ware in the beams of the westering sun.

We mounted and passed him at a hand-gallop. His great head was sunk over his chest, and he never looked up. We never saw him again.

I glanced at my watch with a start of recollection; it was almost five o'clock, and we were due to dine at the Raylescrofts' at eight, a dozen miles away. It would be necessary to make for our lodgings first and get into some different clothes.

As we pulled up at the gate, a Kaffir boy came forward with a yellow envelope bearing the seal of the cable office.

"A writing for you, Baas," he grinned.

It proved to be the answer to our cable of yesterday.

ALAN SEVERN, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Preserve effects of deceased until called for; no definite time.

RAOUL DE ROQUEMORT.

The cablegram was dated at Marseilles.

I tossed the messenger a shilling in reward for his patience.

"There is no answer," I told him, and he went off down the road, post-haste, doubtless making for some illicit drinking-place; for the Transvaal Kaffir is keen on the delights of "civilization."

We spent the next half hour in arraying ourselves in the customary black coat, white waistcoat with pearl buttons, and tall white choker, which collectively embellish the South African diner-out—a costume to which the addition of spurs and riding-gaiters lent a pronounced air of Hyde Park on an April morning. In the tall glass, we resembled nothing so much as a pair of miraculous black beetles with white bellies and yellow antennæ—our gaiters were a glaring tan. I remember smiling at that undignified illusion.

So we galloped away in the fading sunshine, forgetful of to-day's sordid stroke of luck and the cares of to-morrow. Life had all at once become transfigured by the prospect of so many infinitely desirable things awaiting us yonder—always a little way ahead—there in that enchanted mansion that, seeming no nearer than a castle on a far horizon in the dreams of our hopes, at length swept into view around a turn of the road, all splendid in the red rays of sunset.

CHAPTER VI

LORD CROYDON CHALMES AND THE RAINBOW LADY

THE butler was bringing in the wine with his own fat pallid hands; blue-veined and podgy, they were. He was a Frenchman —a Provençal, I believe; Raylescroft had imported him with the wine. His abased, St. Bernard worship of his mistress wrote itself across my memory with every meaningless flutter of his fat white hands —it gave me a ridiculous pang of jealousy, like all the other idolaters! I had found her wonderful enough before with each little feminine readjustment of setting; but to-night she took my breath away in evening dress—a singular gray *décolleté* the color of ashes, which disclosed her faultless shoulders in the white blaze of the many lights whose pale glitter shone in that room like the lights of another world. And the tragic French butler, poor devil, excited neither my anger nor my contempt.

One thing had impressed me as singular enough; there were six covers laid at this glittering board. The place at the head of the table was kept by an unwritten law for the master of the house, who was away at Pretoria. And the other empty chair stood

for something too, something infrangible and absent; a principle and a person. It positively shimmered with suggestions.

Norma glanced quietly at the empty place in question and a faint smile of amusement curved her lips.

"Lord Croydon Chalmes . . ." she said, reading the question in my eyes. "For some reason best known to himself, he has failed to put in his appearance."

"Who is Lord Croydon Chalmes?" I asked carelessly.

"A polished young cynic who is heroically doing his best to spend an unspendable income. He has the honor to be a Queen's Guardsman; a captain, I believe. He is forever on some mysterious furlough. It is said that he buys his furloughs outright; a diamond coronet or so, for Royalty's poor relations; a hundred-guinea steeplechaser once in a way for Somebody's stables, or something equally valuable and desirable for Somebody Else. Or perhaps he makes himself indispensable to the greater gods—the War Office and the Admiralty. In whatever way he manages it, he invariably gets them; he spends them anywhere from London to Thibet. Just now he is all for South Africa and what he is pleased to term its republican orchid-states."

"Lord Chalmes has found a stronger attraction," the Angel put in meaningly across the table; "another sort of orchid which he means to transplant, if he can, to his own conservatory in a certain foggy

clime. Don't be too sure that he will not put in his appearance. I predict that he will arrive belated, but with some unique apology. So make the most of opportunity, my lion-shooting friend, while the coast is clear!"

"Nonsense, Alline!" said Norma, laughing in spite of herself. "Your imagination has run away with you. Lord Chalmes cares for nothing but his own patrician self. In due course he will go away decidedly bored, and that will be the last we shall see of him until we hear of him in some absurd place in Patagonia, or find a paragraph in the *Times* informing us that he has figured in a disastrous aerial ascension with the Prince of Monaco, or has entered the forbidden city of Lhassa, or has given a dinner in Piccadilly. In the end, when his lordship's obituary appears, it will certainly be captioned: 'Died of being bored!'"

Clever parry as it was, I thought that the matter of his lordship might bear looking into. But I merely said, "I take it that Chalmes explores?"

"The hearts of women," supplied the Angel. "He is a superior sort of male *cocotte,* warranted armor-clad and all but invincible in any weather. He is Etienne Gerard agreeably flavored with Horatius-at-the-Bridge and leavened with Monsieur Beaucaire . . . Yes, I've read them," she confessed; "we read 'em all in old Kentucky; the days are so long! But to get back to his lordship: he has the Chevalier whipped to a thin froth. He is so gal-

lant a person that if one were to cast a tin shoe-buckle, to his knowledge, he would send you round a box of assorted boot-trees—with his compliments—in half an hour. For the rest, his manner is admirable, his drawl perfectly adorable, his courage indisputable. He's been everywhere and done everything. Summed up, he is worldly wise; too thorough a cynic to be a rake. I'm not sure that I do not admire him prodigiously; women generally do admire the Bertie Cecil type of men. They are the limelight heroes of life's *matinée*. But that is my little contribution to the Who's Who of the period—his *noblesse*, the Viscount of Chalmes!"

"Excellent, most excellent—upon my word!" a cool, drawling voice said distinctly in the doorway. "Good, deuced good, almost *too* good to be true, and uncommonly flattering! Dear lady, you should write Romance, not read it! . . . Believe me, if you will be good enough to cast the shoe-buckle, I promise to answer for the boot-trees!"

The girl swung round in consternation.

"Chalmes! . . ." she gasped. For the moment, the atmosphere of that room had grown suddenly embarrassing—with one exception.

A tall young man in riding-clothes, immaculate to the last coral button upon his delicately patterned waistcoat, to the last studied crease and crinkle of his glossy "tops," and wearing a monocle screwed in his eye with a conspicuous ease, so that it appeared to have grown there, was standing in the

threshold, languidly flicking at his spurred heel with a rattan quirt. With every move, a diamond on his white hand spat flashes like a thing of life. There he stood, a comely and fetching figure of a man, regarding us with a satirical twinkle in his eyes.

He came lazily down to the center of the room. He was very easy and very graceful. The word "aristocrat" was written all over him. His manner was faultless, not too foppish; a touch of dignity, indeed, and something too of courtliness; for this young man was the scion of an ancient and noble house, with a pedigree as long as himself, and a peer of England. But it was the face of the man that held you. It was one of the handsomest, one of the most cynical faces I have ever seen. Some lurking devil of mockery peeped out of his fine gray eyes, some imp of pessimism played at the corners of his patrician lips. But the effect was not repellant; he was so utterly and engagingly human.

"We had given you up!" cried Norma, surprised.

Chalmes said courteously, "You were not blameable. As it is, I cannot stay. I had merely desired to present my regrets *en passant*. For my entry unheard you have to thank the quality of your carpets and the fact that I saw fit to run in unannounced. Pardon me, I will explain. My man—Holroyd—was thrown to-day by the big dun I have warned him against so many times. You have seen that brute,

I think? As Kipling neatly puts it, he has 'the mouth of a bell and the heart of Hell, and the head of the gallows-tree!' . . . For my part, I have resolved that no man shall ever ride him again. I shall give him a bullet in place of his mash for this day's work. Poor Holroyd is at the Halfway House. He will never get up again."

"It is good of you to tell me this," she said, "and I am pleased to hear that you can forego your pleasures for the sake of a groom. It proves that you have more heart than you give yourself credit for."

Something very like a flush passed over his lordship's handsome features.

"The man was a faithful fellow," he remarked half apologetically. But in a moment the old cynical light was back in his eyes. He wheeled round to us.

"Gentlemen," he said, "—until a more favorable occasion . . ." He went down the room. We bowed stiffly. There wouldn't have been any use trying to match his perfectly easy manner. He paused half-way; an infinitely fascinating figure, gallant and likable, too. To the American girl he said lazily:

"Wreak your thoughts upon expression, dear lady, but paint your word-pictures in future with a pen!" With this parting shot, Chalmes bowed gravely, but with a suspicion of veiled mockery,

passed to the threshold, turned, bowed once more and was gone. In a minute or two the clatter of his horse's hoofs had died away on the road.

"Your cynic interests me," Sherry remarked after a silence. The servant was clearing away the ices and liqueurs. "He is the thoroughbred sort whom one must either love or hate, whichever happens to be more convenient. And if I were a woman, I should certainly do the former. But I'll wager he keeps his word about that horse, and I'd lay you any odds those white hands of his will hold the pistol without a tremor."

"You give me the horrors!" the American girl said with a shiver. "In old Kentucky it's a sin to shoot a horse. We have a better way with man-killers down in my Blue Grass paradise—we *break* them first. It seems that here they shoot them *afterward!* Heavens! what a blood-thirsty topic! Come out on the terrace," she invited him, "and we'll bay the moon for a diversion."

He gave her his arm and they strolled out together.

"I am not afraid of being given the horrors," said Norma. "You may tell me something of René Duval's unhappy fate, if you wish. My father will be sure to ask. Not here; you shall share my own window-seat; believe me, that is a privilege I accord to few."

I followed her through the tall, wide-arched doorway to a familiar alcove. The curtains were closely

drawn, but in another second she had snapped on a rose-shaded incandescent, and in a thrill of memories, I recognized the room. I knew by heart the few articles of furniture which it contained—the chairs, a sculptured bust or two on their carven pedestals; a rosewood writing-table and the little Chippendale secretary from which she had taken the miniature. It was not far away at that moment; I could have touched it with my hand where it lay beneath my waistcoat.

"I call this place my study," she said, "and here I have set up my ancestral gods—only you will not see them. In this magic space, all my air castles have sprung up in fairy architecture, and finally floated out of the window, for I could not capture them, you see! . . . And now, if you please, the story?"

"There is very little to tell," I answered, "though the tale makes up in horror what it lacks in length." And I related briefly how the unfortunate Duval, who was, by the way, a very light sleeper, had slipped away from the camp in the dead of night—it was a little past one o'clock—on hearing a lion snarl in the bush near by. No one had seen him go, but one of the Kaffirs remembered hearing the lion at that hour. He had taken only his express and a few spare cartridges. It was bright moonlight, and he had recklessly followed the brute into a *cul de sac* at the head of a dried-up watercourse, when she had turned at bay. He had kept his head—Duval's

nerves had been all hemp cordage and steel—and had met her lightning spring with two raking shots at short range, but neither had stopped her. Then his gun had jammed on a defective shell—and that was the end. We had found him at dawn with his throat torn out, a ghastly and melancholy spectacle. A mile farther in the Karroo we found his slayer—stone dead; a great gaunt lioness with the dead man's two bullets in her loins and her skin all rusty and eaten with the mange. The ground all around her had been terribly torn up in her death agonies. We buried poor Duval below the cliff, rolling a giant boulder on his solitary grave, and turned our faces back to the Vaal. I told her the story briefly, omitting as much unpleasant detail as the truth permitted; yet when I had finished, her eyes were shimmering with tears.

"That is a sad story. Forgive me for having been inquisitive."

She was silent for a long while. I wondered vaguely if there could have been anything between her and that dead man; but it was a wild conjecture. It was only her womanly pity for a gallant man whom she had known—her regret that his genius should have passed away. Then she dismissed the subject with an air of finality, bringing up her reserves, falling back upon the trivial, like every woman who ever lived in the world.

"Do you find the air of this room oppressive?" she asked. "That window is a bit difficult, but I

should say that you look strong enough to master it. May I trouble you, or shall I ring for the servant?"

I rose and applied myself to the window. At the first effort it came up some six inches, and there it stuck fast. I set my chest against it and gave a sudden heave. It gave abruptly, and I was conscious of a brief dragging tear; something about my clothing had caught on the metalwork of the sash, and I marked with dismay that two of the white pearl buttons were missing from my waistcoat.

The metal claw screwed to the window-sash had taken them off very neatly. Something lay glittering at the girl's feet. She stooped and wonderingly picked it up. It was the diamond miniature of herself.

Suspended by a slender chain of gold, whose mute and broken links were eloquent with their wordless story, I had worn it for twenty weeks, as we trekked through the weird hush of the African *veld,* while we set our lives at hazard with Fate from one day to the next in that land of swift surprise and sudden death. Something of that life I told her now; she had asked unexpectedly, and I painted a graphic picture of the Kalahari—that endless, barren sweep, where the bones of dead adventurers gleam mockingly in the blighting sun.

She surveyed me in a silence I could not fathom. Her eyes, abstracted, seemed to travel far away to where the blue peaks of the Drakensberg towered in

the vaulted sky; where the Matoppo Mountains grinned across the black Mangwe Pass; and beyond them to the low marshy river-levels where the wild game drank at evenfall from the green, shallow pools.

"It is a strange thing, Mr. Severn," she said very softly, at last, "that you should carry a mere fetish with you so long, to so many odd, wild places, through so many perils! Why did you do that?"

But I was silent. I could only avert my face and stare out of that unlucky window, out at the moonlit *veld,* at the unwinking stars.

I could say nothing at all.

"Will you not tell me that? Was it some unique superstition? Or because you remembered my words of that day—that you might not banish it? I shall be candid enough to confess that curiosity is a woman's weakness. You have aroused mine, Mr. Severn."

"By an accident which you will please forget. . . ."

She remained poised, arrested, in that attitude of inquiry. I would have given all I owned for the right to tell her the truth. But the spell of silence, like the shadow of a great imprisonment, held me mute.

Involuntarily I took a step nearer and let my eyes linger upon her beauty.

Her hair was dark, shot with a vague copper luster, like a wake of flame on some midnight tide.

She wore it without a touch of vanity, but simply caught up in some wonderful way about her head in shining, rippling waves that seemed like a radiant halo from which her face glowed pale and beautiful as a star in the heart of night. And even under her vaguely impersonal regard, which appeared to pass over my head, I realized what held me most—her eyes.

They were dark. Dark as the night sky in the rains, but not black; only as dark, and as deep, with a lovely golden undergleam in their liquid depths, even as her dark hair was touched so marvelously with the molten flame of the sea. . . . I had seen a few handsome women in the " full " dress before; the effect of them was rather staggering upon a soldier of fortune whose hand was steadier than his heart; but looking at this girl in the conventional *décolleté* of society, I could have laughed at all the moralists who have condemned it. Her pretty, white shoulders were revealed; her beautiful rounded arms were quite bare; but there was nothing *risqué*. It sat faultlessly upon her gracious innocence, and seemed the fitting garment of perfect purity. She had never known a trace of the coquette. But there were depths, influences, equally irresistible; the hidden power and peril of the sea.

Norma laughed ingenuously; she saw only a very perplexed young man before her.

" What a dismal novelty—a man without a tongue! A modern Oracle of Silence! that is some-

thing new. Tell me, can the oracle be moved to speech?"

She was sitting carelessly on the edge of the rosewood table, slowly swinging one foot to and fro in a mystery of shimmering textures, her other foot upon the floor. The rose-shaded glow of the little electric bulbs fell over her intensely. What a picture she made—and I was very much too close to her for my own peace of mind. She looked at me, amused.

"You are not a very courteous oracle!"

"Only a very foolish one," I said.

She seemed a little puzzled by my silence.

"Oh," she said, "is it so hard to answer a plain question? Why, by this time I might be basking in a train of pretty compliments if his lordship, for example, were in your stead." Her laughter rippled out candidly. "Ah, well, there are not many oracles who would let so excellent an opportunity slip by! But you, perhaps, are different from the rest?"

I was stricken mute. My features remained impassive, but the rising flood was battering dangerously at the gates of speech, and I knew that the gates were going! But she went on with her rippling, amused laugh:

"Ah, Sir Oracle, the interlude is becoming a trifle dull; the populace is being kept waiting! You chose to wear, for reasons unknown (isn't that the legal term?), a fetish, a talisman, which happens

to be a portrait of mine, to the Kalahari, you said. . . . You wore it—why?"

I was perilously close—and abruptly it was done! I had caught her in my arms and rained a storm of kisses upon her face, her lips; and for a few breathless moments she remained passive in my arms, as if she had acquiesced in the decree of a force superior to fate.

"Dear little girl," I said, "it was the talisman of my love—couldn't you understand? That was why I kept it; it is my only excuse for this!" I took her beautiful, amazed face inexorably in my hands, and kissed her again upon the lips. Then I released her gently and stood with my head bowed.

For a moment she stood as still as marble—she might have been some beautiful thing of stone. Quite mechanically her lips moved, but no sound came out of them. She made one swift step forward and stopped as if before an invisible wall. Her face wore an extraordinary expression, like a person making some strong, concentrated effort of the will. I had never seen her look like that. It terrified me. Abruptly, almost miraculously, speech seemed to come back.

"This!" she said. "This . . ."

"Forgive me!" I said; "it is the way of love."

"The way of love!" she echoed. "Be truthful, and say the way of man! Look at me again," and she drew herself up royally, "am I some wanton 'light o' love,' to be overcome with a kiss? Ah,

love!" she added; "what a pretty platitude! what a measure of mockery in that one little word! Or am I in error, and is this merely your way of love-making?"

"I don't know—" I stammered in confusion. "I—er—never made love to anybody else——" I turned my face away in despair, suddenly crest-fallen.

She relented unexpectedly at this.

"Then your way of love-making," she said with the ghost of a smile that was like the shadow of tears, "is possibly a little in need of a curb."

I bent my head, with a very red face.

Then like a fool, I added, "It is possibly a better sort than a love that stands in need of a spur."

"Indeed!" and her chin went up instantly. "But I am forgetting my guests; you will pardon me for leaving you to meditate upon that point until your ideas have improved." And before I could comprehend her meaning she was gone, with a veiled flash of eyes and flutter of pretty skirts.

So we had begun by having a quarrel.

I listened to the fall of her footsteps dying away, and the room seemed to blur. I leaned, rather dazed, against the wall, and my hand blundered on the electric switch, plunging the room in shadow. Stunned by the blind buffeting of chance, I groped my way to a chair—misery breeds best in the dark.

A flood of moonlight came streaming into the room. A musical ripple of laughter floated in from

the terrace outside, and there was a confused murmur of voices. I strained my hearing—but her voice was not there. I caught the low echo of Sherry's deeper tones, then the minor key of the Southern girl's soft drawl, followed by another peal of laughter. Clearly, they were enjoying themselves very well—these two. It was more than I was able to say for myself! Then thoughts came crowding swiftly like unwelcome messengers of disaster, until my mind reeled with them. For minutes I continued sunk in those miserable reflections.

Suddenly I felt a soft little touch on my shoulder. She was there beside me—or I was dreaming. I started up, mystified, and snapped on the lights. I was not dreaming, it was perfectly clear. She had come back!

I was struck by a subtle change. She was all meekness now; the angry mood had passed and left her strangely softened—only a beautiful woman touched in passing by the white-hot plume of some shadowy Angel of Tears. She had been weeping. What a brute I had been! I was speechless—I simply stood in dead silence and stared at her contritely.

"I am waiting," she said very patiently at last. "Have you nothing to say for yourself?"

"Only this," I answered, steadying myself by a great effort to reply—it was like a merciful awakening from some hateful dream. "I love you!—but to-day I will not ask you to marry me. Just now you

are set as far above me as a star, but I will find a way to climb to the star . . . I have found my object in life. Shall I tell you what it is?"

"Hush!" she said; "you must not say these things to me, and I cannot listen to them. It is all impossible. . . . My father will rave at this! It is true, you appeal to me strangely—you are so strong, and so impossible . . . but I cannot give you any encouragement; not even if I were sure of myself. Is that final? It must be; please take it so. And now I beg of you to let this subject drop until you have my permission to reopen it. I have only come back because—because—I wanted to say that I—forgave you!"

To this I said rather staggeringly, "Why have you forgiven me, please?"

Then the red blushes rushed to her temples, and her breath contracted and she was seized with sudden confusion. But she answered meekly enough: "Because I knew I had brought it on myself, and I will not have you think I am so narrow as to believe men are altogether creatures of convention."

She nodded at me in her adorable meekness, out of her woman's wisdom, as if she had made a confession.

"I was unwise to play with fire, and I have paid the penalty by getting singed. You have such extraordinary command of your features! I never dreamed—— And I am willing to believe you meant no disrespect, and that there were—extenuat-

ing circumstances—stay, you need not repeat them, if you please! You will be wiser to content yourself with a conditional pardon and allow this unhappy episode to be forgotten."

"And the condition?" I asked quietly.

"That the mistake is never repeated."

"I accept that condition," I said, "but remember, I make no promises and give no hostages. The day will come when I shall claim them instead. Meanwhile I shall ask you to give me back my miniature. It is the only talisman I ever owned."

She gave it back to me with her unfathomable smile.

"I should advise you to find another fetish," she counseled gently.

"A fetish-worshiper," I told her, "never changes. I ask no better superstition."

I bowed and left her, with a feeling of triumph and despair, and walked out alone to the terrace, reaching it in time to surprise Sherry in the act of taking a touching adieu of his fair companion. He was kissing her hand and gazing adoringly into her eyes at the same time, nor did the lady herself appear pointedly averse. I saw in a glance that he was hard hit, but turned sharp on my heel, making as though I had failed to notice this tender little scene. A Kaffir was bringing round the horses; in five minutes more we were pounding along the homeward road through dead black patches of shadow, crossed by white bars of moonlight.

CHAPTER VII

PIRATE AND PRIVATEER

THE mythical mining-gear left behind by old Steinhardt had turned out to be ordinary excavating tools, with the exception of the big diamond drill, which we found was a very good one of superior type and efficiency. The gold was there, no doubt, but getting it out was another matter.

There is a significant saying of the Rand that gold is not found in South Africa; it is manufactured. It was not long until we discovered this fact to our sorrow, as many had done before us; but we had made up our minds to go ahead with the shaft until we could find a way to float our shares in the market. With enough capital to develop the mine, it would be merely a matter of time. But we didn't have enough capital.

We soon discovered that the Government Gold License of 5s. a month on each of our forty-eight claims was a gigantic tax upon a property which was yielding no visible return. If ever a law was manned expressly in the interest of the "heavy-weights," and deliberately leveled to crush the "peggers," prospectors and small-fry generally, it was

this particular provision of the Transvaal Gold Law. But it accomplished its object admirably, which was in effect to give the great companies undisputed sway and to bar out the small miner from the fruits of his enterprise forever. It only remained for us to break into the heavyweight ranks or go the historic way of "frozen out." In South Africa that significant phrase carries a world of meaning. A volume might be written solely on the heart-breaking process of "freezing-out," as conducted by those finished cracksmen of finance, the gentlemen of the Rand. It is a paradox, but it is a fact—a terribly chilling fact—that it has proven many a man's ruin to own a valuable gold-reef on the Witwatersrand.

The Gold Law was irksome enough, but there was little hope of getting it rescinded, for the great financial houses of the Rand were known to be *en rapport* with the Volksraad, and took pains to see that dangerous innovations were smothered at birth in a golden shower of "influence."

Things were much the same with the Dynamite Monopoly, except that here it was a plain case of dog eat dog. Without dynamite in large quantities, one might as well attempt to hoist Cheops over his shoulder as try to tear the gold of Africa from its lair in the "banket" rock of the Rand. For all this, it was an open secret that the identical dynamite sold in Johannesburg for 76s. the case "flat," could be bought any time by the De Beers Consolidated for 37s. And this at Kimberley, mark you, some ninety

miles farther from the port of entry, all dynamite being brought in in the convenient form of *guhr impregnè* and later made up into cartridges by the Monopoly, which received a handsome bonus from Government for so doing. Every time a stick of dynamite went off, the word, "BONUS!" went up to Heaven in the dull echoes of its detonation—and somebody coolly pocketed the difference. All these things rankled in many quarters and helped to hasten the war.

Meanwhile Mr. Lippert smiled alertly in his sleeve and went about his chosen *metier* of juggling the Volksraad. And honest old Oom Paul cunningly looked to the padlock of his strong-box, or got him new padlocks and other boxes as occasion demanded, not neglecting to keep his inscrutable old eye upon the new Delagoa Bay Railway which should afford him a safe means of retreat in case things finally grew too hot to hold him. For there were not lacking men of foresight who predicted dire disruption and a speedy downfall for this brand-new Oligarchy of his, calling it Mammonized and altogether rotten to the core.

"Those whom the gods would destroy," they said, "they first make mad."

Already, above the golden glare of the calm were heard the mutterings of the storm. In three years the thunderbolt fell from a red sky.

Upon this troubled sea of pirate and privateer we had launched ourselves at a breath. We had re-

christened the mine the "Rand Reef Mines, Ltd.," and had duly registered it under that name; but between ourselves it was always spoken of as "Severn's Luck"—we hoped in secret that it would never come to be known as Severn's Folly. But those were days of Homeric toil, of impersonal and secret fears.

We had made Ingulf foreman of a select shift of Basutu laborers whom we had picked up, and had set him to work at extending the shaft, an occupation to which he did not take at all kindly. Fighting and the shedding of blood—human blood, to be exact—would doubtless have been more to his taste. But he stuck to it rather grimly. Had he not sworn to fight our battles and walk in our shadow? It was a curious thing to see that great Viking who was perhaps the reincarnation of heroes of a bygone age, stripped to the waist and launching blow after blow with a heavy pick against the ragged sides of the shaft; his teeth set grim and hard, in his eyes the light of some awful battle of the past, with the dank swelter dripping from his mighty chest.

For every blow he launched, I fancied he saw some ancient foe of his go down, split to the chin. It was quite extraordinary and beyond fathoming, but I never could look at him long without imagining that I saw the flash of swords, playing with the spectral and sinister glare of summer lightning between long lines of mailed men. He seemed to be the very spirit of battle, the incarnate ego of the

grim trade of war. And always I would fall to wondering what he had been in that past of his which he either would not or could not reveal.

But the shaft went down, down; stope after stope; day after day, and the great heap of dull-glittering quartz piled at its mouth grew apace.

Blast after blast, Ingulf tamped them in and set the fuse. Presently a dull explosion would bark from below and then he would spring back into the hole with his Basutus and begin to clear away the débris, only to prepare for another charge. In time we rigged a windlass which we had found in sections among old Steinhardt's forgotten gear, and brought up the ore in a bucket. But all this ore was useless enough without a battery of stamps to crush it. That would come in time; for the present it was enough to follow the reef. "After quartz the assay!" It was obvious that our remaining thousand pounds could not last much longer in any case; and when it was gone more capital must be found. Whether we should be able to find it, time would tell. Upon these things hung our ultimate hope.

So the work on the mine went forward merrily, or rather grimly, for they were a silent lot, were Ingulf and his sable crew. Meanwhile we had become frequent visitors at Raylescroft House. Norma was an ardent horsewoman and had fallen in the habit of taking protracted rides across the *veld,* sometimes in company with the Right Honorable the Viscount, whose stay in Africa gave prom-

ise of becoming a prolonged one, but more often with only the American girl, and a very comely Centauress was that lady. And once or twice they rode over to the mine together and surprised us in the midst of our interminable blasting and stoping.

"One would think," the airy Miss Buckerton had remarked one day when they had descended upon us from the great house, "that you were merely trying to see how big a hole it is possible for you to make in the earth, for you never crush any of that big pile of rock. What are you going to do with it all?"

"Nothing just yet," we confessed. "But some day——"

"And just see that great fellow with the iron bar," she purred. "See him move that big stone, Norma! What a chest he has, and what a martial face, and what eyes! . . . He looks as if he were perpetually spoiling for a row, and he makes me think of a picture called 'The Last Viking,' that we saw at the *Academie.*"

"Hush!" Norma whispered. "He may hear you!"—for Ingulf had glanced up keenly.

"You are not far off the track there," Sherry remarked. "The man is certainly of Norse descent, though it appears that he was born somewhere here in Africa. He has suffered some sort of a lapse of memory and can tell us almost nothing of his past. But what of our ride—can you wait a bit while we saddle up?"

On these fortunate days we would have Ingulf bring up the horses, and away we would go presently for a gallop over the *veld,* leaving the mine to take care of itself. It was while we were returning through the twilight from one of these late afternoon canters that I seized occasion to chaff Sherry somewhat pointedly with regard to the fair Miss Buckerton of old Kentucky.

"Where will it end?" I queried finally.

He leaned over in the saddle and stared at me.

"Since you ask," he said, "she is too lovable and much too fine to be left globe-trotting—cruising about the world. That cruise must be stopped. It is inevitable that I shall propose to the lady at the first opportunity—and if she will have me, I shall marry her."

"And if she steers for another port?" I asked him.

"Then I am off to seek for my lost Vikings. But I've made some progress, you know, and I am not without hopes. Besides, she is an American. In America, thank Heaven! there is no such thing as 'caste.'"

"But the lady is heavily ballasted with gold," I observed. "Riches are the lost continents of love."

He sat up very straight in the saddle and shut his teeth hard, and I knew then that he was thoroughly in earnest, for it was never in the Severn blood to be of two minds at once.

"Riches be blazed!" he said. "Rich or poor,

it's all one to me. Depend upon it, Alan, I should make the running if she were Crœsus in a corset or Mammon in petticoats!"

"Forcible, but inelegant. But perhaps you have a plan?"

"Plan!" he cried contemptuously, "not I. Was there ever a man in love who had a plan? If so, he must be a great curiosity. It is true that the lady is very rich," he added soberly, "and I can understand your mercenary schemers going in with a set form of play, as one does in a game of baccarat; but I am no fortune-hunter. Yet this much is certain: he who meets not often must meet to some purpose, for the ship that is passed in the fog unspoken will never be spoken on that trip; she has glided into the fog forever. . . . For my part, I will speak that ship, and learn what I must know before she has glided by."

We rode home the rest of the way in silence.

A week after this conversation had occurred, upon an afternoon when I had slipped away from the mine with no very definite purpose in view, I dismounted alone at the entrance of the Raylescroft grounds, blissfully unaware that a disagreeable surprise awaited me. A Kaffir at the gate stood holding an exceedingly beautiful black horse, of whose ownership I thought I could venture a guess. As I strolled up the dark avenue of eucalyptus trees to the house, I became aware that the drawing-room was already brilliantly illuminated.

The servant let me in, and two persons rose as I entered: Miss Raylescroft and a tall young man in impeccable riding-clothes, whom I recognized instantly. He came forward lazily with his slight, mocking smile, and gave me the white hand on which the diamond sparkled like a star.

"The Right Honorable the Viscount Chalmes—Mr. Severn," Norma had said, this time presenting us formally. "You will become great friends, I hope," she added sweetly. There was a faint note of amusement in her tone.

Chalmes smiled a little cynically, and I murmured something about being overjoyed to be numbered among his lordship's select circle of acquaintance.

"Charmed to meet again!" he threw back almost drawlingly, though for all that, his voice held a certain languid clearness that approached perhaps more nearly the perfection of mere utterance than anything I had ever heard, and at the same time it struck me as being the exact antithesis of Raylescroft's jerky manner of speaking. My thoughts wandered mechanically to that enigmatical person, who, by the by, was still away at Pretoria, where it was rumored that he had the ear of President Kruger himself; for it was well known that trouble was brewing between the Government and the Outlanders. And well I could guess that any advice that Raylescroft might see fit to give boded no good to his countrymen.

"We have met before, it seems," Chalmes was repeating, bringing me back with a jerk, "and I fancy, too, that I have heard something of you from some one I have known—ah, yes! from Melton of my own club in London; the 'Piccadilly Pets,' you know. Now that I come to recall it, he had shown me a pair of lion skins; he spoke most highly, I remember, of your singular knowledge of their habits and—er—uncommon skill in fetching him up to the spot where he shot the brutes. Something of an explorer, too, I infer? Very interesting life!"

"Quite!" I answered, fuming inwardly, for I had shot those particular lions myself, as it happened, at a place on the Sabi River near Gungunhana's Kraal. I added with cutting *sang froid,* "Nearly as much so as that of Her Majesty's Guardsmen in these piping times of peace! But you are in error; I have more recently gone in for a mining property and turned my attention to a different sort of exploring."

Chalmes countered crushingly to this.

"Ah, yes, short route to fortune—or misfortune. . . . These things, I take it, are sometimes a little hard to digest? Well, I wish you luck."

It was like a game of fence, all lunge and parry.

"Thank you," I said dryly, and shortly afterward I took my leave, relinquishing the field, for I could do no less. That was but the beginning, the anticlimax—the climax came later. It came, as I

have marked that such things have a way of coming, in the evening. Raylescroft had come back from Pretoria by that time.

The days had spun on. By day we delved, and by night, as often as we dared, rode to the great house. But just as often rode Lord Chalmes on his beautiful black thoroughbred; always the same, polished and debonair and resourceful; monocle screwed in eye; diamond sparkling on the white hand that carried his riding-quirt. A romantic, rather likable figure; something of the daredevil, too—very much the ladies' man. If rumor was to be believed, he had done a number of daring things in different parts of the world; entered a forbidden city, smashed the "Auckland Spider," won steeple-chases, done a host of unexpected things in unexpected places.

After all, I could not bring myself to the point of positive dislike, though I saw well enough the port he was steering for. But Raylescroft seemed to grow grimmer and more taciturn than ever, and more than once I caught him regarding me intently in a way I could not fathom. And somehow a fixed presentiment of vague disaster drifted across my mental horizon at the thought of that strange, silent old man.

I was drifting, drifting, like a mariner without a compass, without a rudder, on a midnight sea; drifting daringly but blindly into the blackness of things unguessed. And Sherry, too, seemed to have ar-

rived with his Angel at an *impasse*. He had grown moody of late, and even bearishly reserved—as a man will at times. He was feeling the adverse currents of life, and was groping, thinking himself out, for he, too, was drifting.

At this distance, out of the visits we paid to the Gray House on the Hill in those last days, one night alone stands out with extraordinary vividness of detail; the others are mostly blurred. Even in Africa where all of the nights are lovely, that evening was one to be remembered.

For once, its strong appeal failed to move Sherry a particle; my invitation to bear me company he waved aside; when at last I spoke pointedly of the beauties of the night, he fortified himself with pipe and book, and would not budge. I was disgruntled, and I rode forth alone.

I remember that night only too well. I can see it now. . . . The long stretch of winding road; the brooding *veld;* the flat-crowned mimosa trees that we galloped down, singly and by platoons; the silver shallows of the purling roadside stream where I would always rein in my horse to let him drink before he climbed the long hill to the big gray mansion he had learned to know as well as I—for he knew with equine certitude that it marked journey's end; and over it all the white mystery of moonlight and the pale, friendly, immortal stars. It was a longish ride, but we had come to know many a short

cut, that nag and I, and we could make it in something less than an hour.

As I rode up through the trees to the house and threw my bridle to a Kaffir who approached from the stables, I noted with a feeling of secret relief that for once his lordship's handsome black horse, the infallible sign of his presence before me in the field, was nowhere in sight. I ran up the steps, humming some half-remembered lilt of an opera under my breath, and then I rang.

I was admitted by Raylescroft in person, who, blocking the vestibule with his great frame, fastened his snapping black eyes on me with the curious intensity of expression which always sent an instinctive chill down my spine, and calmly waited for me to speak. I remember his attitude—the head a little forward, the shoulders a little hunched; one great red hand gripped fast upon the doorlatch, the other hidden out of sight in the sweep of his ridiculously short blue reefer; and I remember his singular concentration of gaze; his mahogany-colored skin; his white hair.

He maintained his heavy calm, weighing me with his somber eyes. I managed to stammer at last:

"Er—is Miss Raylescroft about?" It was all I could think of to say. And I couldn't have said anything more unfortunate. He did not answer me at once, but kept me fixed with his chilling gaze, until I felt the strain.

"Not at present—" he got that out dryly at last.

"She will doubtless be here shortly, and you may see her then, if you like. Before you do, permit me to offer a word of advice. You will excuse my bluntness, my friend; as to that, it is a fashion of mine to get straight to the point. You're looking out for yourself—" he waved his hand— "I make allowances. . . ."

I didn't see what he was driving at; I was a bit dazed. He said suddenly: "I've been studying you. . . . You're ambitious. I don't say you're not above board; you're open enough. It isn't that. Ambition is all very well in a young man like—you. But under certain conditions it becomes—unwise. . . ." There was something abominably significant in his manner. "Those conditions happen to exist, sir, in my household. I am speaking plainly, I hope?"

He made a sharp pause there. As for me, I stood and stared at him blankly, for at length in a dim sort of way, his motive began to dawn on me.

"In a word," he went on relentlessly while I listened as if fascinated, "I accept no fortune-hunters into my family." His eyes had grown hard and cynical in an instant. "That is my fiat. And now listen; not a word of love to my daughter. Not a syllable! You're held answerable. . . . Hark to that! The man who leads her to the church-door will be one whose position in the world is his best guaranty that he takes her for herself alone—and you are not that man."

God knows how those words cut! Living fire would have been nothing to them! There he stood, that inexorable old man, with his beetling face and sardonic sneer, hurling out his sentences one on another, with unalterable determination, and beating a trip-hammer blow with every word he uttered.

"One moment, sir," I broke in. "Am I to understand from this that you have pledged your daughter to marry Lord Chalmes, and with her own sanction?"

"You are to understand whatever you choose. Consult your own preference in the matter of waiting until Miss Raylescroft returns. My house is always open, sir, to my daughter's guests."

Stunned—without uttering a word—I reeled away from him through the open doorway, and out into the bright African moonlight beyond—mechanically, half turned back to the lighted hall; but recovering myself, bit down an oath, snatched up my bridle from the astonished Kaffir who stood holding my horse at the verge of the steps below, and lurched unsteadily into the saddle.

Then I rode away through the trees.

Just as I had cleared the gate, a woman's low laugh rippled out musically from a point somewhere in front of me; it was echoed instantly by one of more masculine timber and Chalmes' beautiful black thoroughbred came cantering slowly out of the shadow toward the open gateway, side by side with a white pony I knew.

I passed them rapidly, yet I found my opportunity to glance squarely in the lady's face. She bowed slightly and that was all. Her face was impenetrable. I rode on. Something—some strong conviction made me sure that I had looked upon her face for the last time in many days. She never glanced back. I caught only the brief shimmer of the moonlight on her pony's white haunch—and she was gone abruptly, without a word.

At the turn of the road, I halted and looked back.

There, with every gable outlined distinctly, though it must have been half a mile away, and looking weird and fantastic in the uncertain light, stood the House of Raylescroft—the house I had renounced! Longingly I looked at it with a yearning beyond words—and then with an oath akin to a sob, I drove in the spurs.

CHAPTER VIII

GOLD GONE GLIMMERING

THE mine lay idle and naked in the blinding glare of noonday. It seemed flung out convulsively and violently, like some ugly, twisted dead man; and the blazing yellow sunlight made a monstrous play upon it there and cast a terrific shadow down the big black jaws of the shaft. The wall of shadow fascinated me. It was portentous. A fixed presentiment grew on me as I gazed; the mine and its fantastic gear and the colossal shadows all turned strange to the eye, like an unreal picture projected upon a screen from a long way off. Things took on an odd effect of distance there in the brilliant sunlight. With astonishing abruptness, everything vanished absolutely out of my visual sense and I fell a prey to amazingly lucid mental processes. They were intensely painful ones. That was the day after my disastrous visit to Raylescroft House.

Staring into the shadows I reviewed that visit succinctly.

I had gone there in my sublime adolescence, burning with a big ideal. I had tripped up those steps, humming my pretty lilt from an opera—I burned with a double shame when I thought of it—a lilt

from an opera! I was all afire with my moonglow of love. And then old Raylescroft, reading my callow soul, had grimly squirted cold water on the foolish flames. He had dropped a sardonic hint of an arrangement with somebody—Chalmes—doubtless with his daughter's sanction; and then had flung his bitter epithet of " fortune-hunter! " right into my face.

He had smashed me with an immense finality. I wasn't the man, he said. . . . He was a man who meant what he said. Back of it all could be discerned the debonair figure of Lord Chalmes, remaining inscrutably in the background. I left the lady out. But I couldn't forget that she had cut me dead with a nod. She had witnessed the torture in my face and had ridden by without a word, which, of course, she had a perfect right to do. So my big ideal was a little one now; it had shrunk enormously!

There was a little shred of hope. This mine . . . Nothing but a colossal fortune could shake the will of that old man. It was all obvious; he may have been in difficulties, too—financial straits, perhaps. I would have helped him if I could. There was nothing left for me but to go on, and then, if I failed, time enough for the land of lost Vikings.

Ingulf's broad shoulders appeared above the level of the shaft. I wondered a little what could have taken him down there when he should have been taking his nooning. I knew that his energy was tire-

less, but even muscles of steel require a rest sometime. His explanation startled me.

"Baas," he said, "the ore has given out!"

Sherry had been dozing under an awning. He started up. "What's up?" he mumbled sleepily.

"Go down and see, Baas!" was the reply.

We descended the shaft to investigate. It took a long time. When it was over at last, we came up, looking rather white and startled. The vein of banket rock—our beautiful, gold-bearing conglomerate—had lost itself in a mysterious stratum of crumbling white schist of an ancient look. We had drilled avidly into this schist, and nosed up other strata still more ancient in appearance. There had evidently been a subterranean landslip, perhaps a thousand years before, perhaps a round ten thousand—who could say? But our dream of riches had vanished.

There was a nasty impotent pain in me somewhere. I made a senile attempt at laughter.

"We're done," I said, "we're through with this. The gold has gone glimmering. We are paupers; it's 'trek'—or starve! And for my part, I'm beastly glad of it."

Sherry spoke up more hopefully. "There's a man at the Randfontein Mine. I saw him there; a little hawk-nosed American named Jepson—mining expert; that kind of duffer—'Arizona Jepson.'—his fee is usurious; a matter of twenty pounds. Grasping beggar! But I'm told his opinion is worth

any price he names. It's like enough he can help us."

"Have him up of course," I said. "But take my word for it, we're done with this."

"We could do nothing but await Jepson's arrival. He turned up promptly at four o'clock; a hawk-faced, queer, leathery little man of sixty, with a sinister gray eye, prominent bulging temples and a mouth like a straight line. He came coatless, slouch-hatted, alert, and absolutely unperspiring. He was clad in a red shirt and a pair of faded corduroys, crammed into enormous jackboots flecked with red loam, and he kept a long black stogie cigar forever tilted at a ridiculously rakish angle between strong white teeth. He rode a tall and wicked-looking yellow horse with a cruel brand burnt onto its left flank. It must have been at least seventeen hands high. As he clambered down from his high-peaked saddle, he came around in front and looked this sinister brute full in the eye, and it evidently *understood*. He never tied it and it never moved from the spot.

Jepson stepped smartly over to the edge of the shaft and surveyed it peeringly, with a sinister, fixed attention, as a man stares at a rattlesnake. Without a word he walked away from it straight to the bore-hole that old Steinhardt had sunk. He spent more time here. We watched him in a sort of fascinated silence. All his actions, his gestures even, seemed animated by an immense prevision. Presently he turned away, and his lip curled. He picked up a

fragment of ore and began to whistle something rapid and jerky. Finally he motioned to the windlass. At a sign Ingulf manned it while Jepson sprawled into the bucket where he sat looking for all the world like a great brown toad as we reeled him down.

Sherry said gloomily, "Queer bounder!" The windlass creaked out a horrible *crescendo*. "He'll earn his money."

In ten minutes there came a tug on the rope. Ingulf brought him up spinning. Jepson came out of the bucket imperturbable as ever, and looked us over without so much as a flicker of his eyelids. All this time he had not spoken five words.

"Well," I said at last, "what have you seen?"

The American expectorated down the shaft. Then he drawled, "Stranger, I reckon I have seen a heap. And now I'll trouble you for my little matter of twenty pounds!"

With a shrug, I passed over the notes. Jepson pouched them coolly without relaxing a line of his hard face. But the expert mining engineer came out in a trice from behind the mask of the typical Western prospector. He spoke sharply and incisively now and went straight to the point.

"Without a quarter of a million behind it—which I take it you can't command—this mine of yours is not worth five shillings. With enough capital you may make it a paying deep-level property in time. You have taken out perhaps enough quartz to bring

you in two hundred pounds sterling at the market price of ore. That is all you'll ever take out. And why? Because your reef winds up short in a 'fault' —a lot of alien strata thrown up on the vein of quartz ages ago by some volcanic break. You'll never get through that mass of foreign strata—it's some thousands of feet in thickness—short of a huge expense. As we say in Arizona, your lode has 'petered out!' Take my advice, sell out at a loss, and drop it!"

Jepson snapped shut the slit that served him for a mouth and relapsed suddenly into the typical Western prospector. He swung himself up with incredible agility on his yellow horse. Once in the saddle, he turned with cynical unconcern and fired a question at us.

"Who sunk that borehole over there?"

"Old Steinhardt—the party who sold us the mine."

"I thought so, stranger! Well, you can gamble strong that this Hebrew-sounding sharp knew all about it when he sold you out. And now I'll tell you one thing more. That borehole cuts the 'fault' about a hundred feet below the dip of your lode. That's what it's there for, my blooming British friend—sort of a little joker in the pack. You've been done, swindled, held up and buncoed. I won't ask for how much, gentlemen. You've paid my figure; I won't rub it in. Good-by, stranger, take my advice, and drop it!"

He was off with a wave of the hand. We watched the tall yellow horse and his lean rider disappearing from view at an amazing pace. Then we sat down and stared at each other blankly. There wasn't a question of the man's sincerity. We had been taken in, he said. He was in fact cocksure that old Steinhardt had swindled us. Of course it wasn't actionable. But had he?—had all that left-handed family history, all that irrelevant emotion, that triumph, that despair, been real or feigned—clever acting? We were not sure. Steinhardt had left the country; we never knew. And we never thought of tracing him at Berlin until all impulse to do so had gone by.

By that time we didn't care any more.

At least the mine was practically worthless except to somebody with unlimited cash, and then only as a deep-level property, this cad of a Yankee engineer, this typical Western prospector had said like a judge pronouncing a decree. And so "Severn's Luck" had proved to be "Severn's Folly" in the end. It was a fitting climax to everything that had gone before. Jepson was still within range of a hallo. We would call him back, and let——

There was a great clatter of hoof beats close by. A big man on a big bay horse had reined up alongside, and the tall black shadows of horse and rider suddenly shut off the blinding sunlight. He sat quite still in the saddle, looking down at us in silence.

He had a hard face, too, but it was not hard in the

way that Jepson's face was hard. Somehow it lacked the contaminating taint of the money-greed. For the rest, he had a brick-red skin, closely shaven, a square clean jaw under a stubby, short mustache, and a pair of compelling gray eyes as hard as flint. He wore a suit of crumpled Bradford tweeds, with canvas gaiters to match; but his linen was very fine and clean.

"You've had Jepson over to pass sentence, I see," the big man remarked abruptly, with a sharp look toward the fast vanishing figure of that worthy. "I know Jepson. . . . He's a bird of ill omen! May I ask what's amiss?"

The shrewdness of the query staggered me, and I hesitated momentarily. Yet, what did it matter to men who were as good as ruined? So I said candidly:

"He has just classed this mine as a deep-level property, which means, I suppose, that it is practically worthless except to some person of great resources and unlimited prestige."

"I am such a person," the stranger replied unexpectedly. And suddenly he added, "What would you say to an offer of, say, five thousand pounds cash down on the nail for a half interest—I to find the necessary capital for exploiting the mine?"

Astounded, I answered regretfully, "I should jump at the offer save for one thing. I've been about everything, if you care to know; explorer, transport-rider, and something of an adventurer—

but never a swindler. To my mind, this property is played out, sucked dry as an orange. Myself, I have been swindled and there's an end of it."

The stranger gave his thigh a mighty slap, and his hard face lit up all at once with a singularly winning smile.

"Sir," he cried in his peculiar deep falsetto, "an honest man is a sufficient rarity in Africa to merit my best consideration. I renew my offer; in a word, I make you a plain business proposition, putting my judgment against yours. And I don't deny that I am coming well out of it for the sum I have named. What is more, I shall be as frank as yourself, and tell you that I have come here prepared in advance to buy your mine—on one condition: you are to leave everything here to me and enter the service of my Company in the field. Do you accept?"

"Not so fast, my friend!" I said with an access of caution. "First, who are you, and why do you make me this offer?"

The big man chuckled, quite hoarsely at first, but ending in a queer, high, falsetto break. Then he drew from his breast pocket a cheque-book and a stylographic pen. With a practised hand, he rapidly filled in a blank cheque, resting the book on his saddle-horn, signed it and passed it down to me.

"My name," he said with his odd, broken chuckle, "is at the bottom of that cheque. I have stated my proposition—there is the money; take it or leave it alone!"

I read the cheque with a dazed face and proffered it to Sherry, who waved it off contemptuously and stood eyeing the man on horseback with a broad smile of comprehension. That masterful face was well known in England; scarcely an issue of the great London dailies but contained its stereotyped likeness on one page or another, with accounts of the man's doings at the other end of the world; his fabulous wealth—variously estimated at from eight millions to ten millions of pounds; his eccentricities, his vivid personality and his boundless ambition, which, to do him justice, was ever more for England than himself.

My doubts vanished as I read the cheque:

BANK OF AFRICA

Johannesburg, South African Republic,
Dec. ——, 1895.

Pay to the order of the Bearer Five Thousand Pounds.

CECIL RHODES.

Cecil Rhodes! . . . That name rang loud in Africa, and louder still in the great world beyond the seas. The big man on the bay horse was the Premier of Her Majesty's colonies in South Africa.

Rhodes said with a laugh, "You see, Mr. Severn, that I knew my man. Oh! I have heard of your doings in Matabeleland. If I am not in error, you were the only man of Wilson's ill-starred Patrol with the wit to find his way out of that death-trap. . . .

Ah, those Matabele are fighters and will give us trouble yet! Again, if my memory serves, you were one of the hounds that were in at the death of our old friend, Lobengula, at the Zambesi. They pointed you out to me in Bulawayo, and I never forget a face. And now enough of this; time is precious. What is your answer to me?"

I said to this, "I'm your man, Mr. Rhodes."

"Very good. As for the mine, my offer stands, and it goes without saying that I shall make it pay. The other thing's a serious matter, as you may find before you're through with it. It involves two powerful nations, England and—well, another country. But who is this young man?" he added with quick suspicion.

"He is my kinsman, and part owner in the mine. If I enter your service he goes with me."

Rhodes' face cleared.

"I daresay we shall be able to find him a situation. But the enterprise I speak of requires more than ordinary discretion; you must answer for him there. And who is that man?"

He was staring curiously at Ingulf, who, drawing up his great form, returned the look with equal fixedness.

"He's a dog of war, Your Honor—" Sherry spoke up, "a Viking from the Past. . . . Like another Perseus, he's in search of a Gorgon to slay, and he's a first-class fighting-man. You should transplant him to his proper sphere. His name is

Ingulf, *alias* Ingulfa. I answer for him, Mr. Rhodes."

"Oh! you do," Rhodes said dryly. "Well, I think I can send him where he will find plenty of blood-letting to do. And now, gentlemen, we will get down to business, if you please. It has been said of me that I do most of my business in the street, and with some truth. An ordinary conspirator would invite you to his rooms and unfold his plot with a show of secrecy, but I am not an ordinary conspirator. Besides, I know of no better place to talk than here, and of none freer from eavesdroppers. Now, to begin."

His matter-of-fact air and tone fell away from him abruptly and a light of deathless conviction came into his face. He began to walk up and down energetically amid the rubble strewn about him everywhere, knocking the pebbles right and left. I caught a glimpse of his profile now and then. With its Napoleonic nose and massive jaw, it reminded me forcibly of the redoubtable silhouettes carved on the old Roman coins.

He swept irresistibly into the heart of his subject, tugging at his mustache now and then, but never at a loss for a graphic phrase. His voice rose at times to a high, broken falsetto—a peculiarity of Rhodes when affected by the remarkable inward stimulus of his big schemes. The quenchless fire of the born empire-builder was lighted strangely in his big, broad, ruddy, indomitable face.

"People say I'm unscrupulous, and perhaps I am! But not for Cecil Rhodes. All these years I have worked with a single object: to paint the map of Africa British red. The English flag from Cairo to the Cape; that's my dream!"

I said, "It's a big dream, Mr. Rhodes."

"But it's sane," he said quietly. "And Africa is a big continent to match the dream. For all the pitiful blundering of Downing Street, when the time comes, England will not throw her away. And the rest? The Belgians? Faugh!—a lot of blood-sucking vampires! The Portuguese? Slavers, all! The Germans? The Mailed Hand will grind those poor black people of Damaraland to powder before it has done with them. And now the Dutch!"

Rhodes pulled up short and raised his right hand.

"God knows my heart, gentlemen, and so do the Dutchmen of the Cape. At heart I am with them, and their way of life is mine; go into my house at Groote Schuur and you will see. For the true Afrikander I have nothing but friendship. But the Dutch republic in the Transvaal is a hollow travesty of government, an oligarchy dominated by the grim old Dopper, Kruger, and a carpet-bagging crew from Holland. Pretoria leans on Amsterdam. Between the two an Englishman is nowhere! I tell you this Government of theirs is rotten—rotten at the heart!"

Then he calmed down.

"But after all it is not the Dutch who need con-

cern us now. We shall be able to deal with them when the time comes. The main thing now is the Hinterland. Kruger is shut off by Rhodesia; Germany by treaty; France by her commercial schemes in West Africa and the Sahara. We have to do with the two shrewdest men in Europe, Wilhelm the Preparer and his unwilling stalking-horse, Leopold the Unready, whose dark sweat-shop in the Congo does not pay so well as it once did. So Leopold will push his stakes northward to new countries well out of the limelight's glare, where he can play the old game anew.

"First there will be the usual blind of 'peaceful exploitation,' then another Protectorate. . . ." It struck me that Rhodes understood the "game" only too well!

"But this time," he added, "the eagle's claws will be well masked. The expedition will start from Beira, on the east coast—not from the Congo; and a Frenchman will be the catspaw to pull the German chestnuts out of the fire; one Raoul de Roquemort, a Marquis of the old *régime*, a preposterous duellist, a ruined gamester with ready wits, the *entrée* to palaces, and the devil's courage. He is now on his way to Africa."

"Duval's cousin!" it flashed upon me. "The man of the cablegram!" But I held my peace.

There was some need of haste, Rhodes went on rapidly. The Frenchman would land at Beira in four days, but should spend some time there recruit-

ing an escort of Swahili porters. "Leopold will give him *carte blanche,* but he will lose no time in striking out for his real objective, the unexplored region beyond Lake Rudolf, up to the north of the Madi Mountains." His program contemplated nothing less than the prompt seizure of this immensely valuable district. France would wash her hands of him, of course. . . . Downing Street would be fast asleep as usual!

Rhodes paused with a dark smile.

"And then?" I asked breathlessly.

"Then Leopold will spring his Protectorate!"

"But you?" I cried, "and England——"

He cut me short with his remarkable broken chuckle, but his face was suddenly illumined.

"Ah, my friend," said Cecil Rhodes, with a piercing glance that seemed to burn through to my brain, "the flag of England, that stands for peace and honor and civilization, will fly above that soil—and Englishmen will be there to raise it! That share is for you!"

CHAPTER IX

CECIL RHODES

"THERE is gold there," said Rhodes, "plenty of it. I have seen fine gold ingots that came from there. Nobody knows who smelted them. The country has never been explored by a white man, although it is larger than Scotland. But the people in that neighborhood are very warlike—pretty much all cannibals—and there are tremendous natural barriers to pass, unknown forests and great mountains. Explorers have been very chary of visiting those parts, for it is said that human sacrifice is a custom of the people, though I have no faith in such stories. At any rate Leopold's plans are well laid. He will annex the country if he can."

"And what shall you do, Mr. Rhodes?" I asked point blank.

"Do?" cried Rhodes. "Do what Englishmen have always done, get in there first! You must take care of that. This district is enormously valuable. England must not be permitted to lose it. And she will if Downing Street is allowed to come blundering into it as usual."

"It must be placed beyond the power of Downing Street to interfere," he declared. I would have to

proceed warily—yes, obtain a concession from the ruler or king in power, mining privileges and so forth. To clinch matters I could run up the Union Jack and demand England's protection as a British subject. He hardly thought they would be able to get around *that*.

"Of course I shall see to it that the papers for the grants are properly drawn—and iron-clad!" He chuckled in his humorous staccato. What was more, he would back me with his private fortune in any sum up to a million. The country once in the British "sphere of influence," and we could safely leave the rest to fate. Fate was always reliable at that stage.

Perhaps he foresaw the usual string of native wars, and in the end a great British Federation in Africa, with himself as Dictator of it all—who can say? Yet there was something of the sublime in this man's colossal schemes, unscrupulous as his methods may have seemed, and at the bottom of him an intense and burning patriotism, a genuine love of England, of English rule, English destiny, that was at once exalted and strange.

"And should the Frenchman attempt to oust you then, we will send an army—a strong force, at the least—to back you up. You'll be allowed a free hand. By the Lord, yes! God never meant savages to govern themselves."

"And what if the people of that country are not savages at all, or turn out to be semi-civilized like the

Abyssinians?" I asked. Was it because I had caught an ironic gleam in Ingulf's inscrutable eyes?

Rhodes pooh-poohed the idea. It wasn't possible. What! In Africa? He laughed outright. In any case my fortune would be made. There would have to be a governor for the new Crown Colony, or at the least a resident commissioner. When he, Rhodes, gave his word. . . . His tone was eminently practical. Why, the country was dead in line for his great Cape to Cairo Railway. Think of it—railways—telegraphs—yes, newspapers! His voice soared to high falsetto and ran the gamut to staccato. I could be the Great Man. He was content to be the power behind. That was all he wanted. That—and English institutions, English ways of government. Of course. . . . His big interests in Africa were not compatible with any other, he confessed frankly.

He waved all this aside abruptly.

"And now, when can you trek?"

"Whenever you like, Mr. Rhodes—and the sooner the better. To be candid, my liking for this place has faded, and I rather fancy the job in hand."

He nodded approvingly. "Come to the Rand Club and dine with me at eight o'clock. I will arrange for a private room, and I wish you to meet a friend of mine. He may interest you perhaps."

He whistled up the big bay. We watched him gallop off at a spanking pace in a cloud of dust. Twenty minutes later we were clattering townward

in his wake. On the road I seized the opportunity to make a remark to Sherry upon a very delicate subject.

"You seem keen on this up-country trek," I observed, "devilish keen, remembering the odds are long that we may never come out alive. May I inquire if it has anything to do with the Lady of the Golden Hair?"

He laughed ruefully.

"As you are brazen enough to ask, I may as well confess that it has. To be quite candid, whenever I popped, and I flatter myself that I always did it exceptionally well, that girl would simply laugh in my face. When I flared up she would beg my pardon so winningly that I invariably forgave her until the next pop. At last, when I had grown perfectly desperate, I told her out of hand that I should pop no more—no, not for all the golden tresses in America and the prayers of all the *houris* in Paradise!

"I told her that—it was that last night on the terrace, you remember—and it sobered her like a shot, but I stood by my guns. It was time to come away, or would be in another ten minutes. I sat on the lowest step in gloomy silence and wasn't even decently civil. And that girl sat contritely above me in the white moonlight—it turned all her golden hair to tawny orange and her eyes from blue-green to bright purple!

"There she sat and simply looked at me out of

those blue-green-purple eyes of hers. And once she cooed some perfectly inane platitude in her slow voice that sounds like the softest tinkle of a golden bell dropped straight from Heaven. 'Pon my honor, that was absolutely all she did.

"How it could have happened I don't know, but in ten seconds more I found myself kneeling abjectly at her feet. Would you believe it—I was popping as I had never popped before! She listened sweetly until I was all through. Then she went off in a monstrous peal of laughter!"

He groaned at the recollection.

"I looked at her and tried to swear, but something in her puckered face was irresistible and I burst out laughing! We laughed like two fiends—laughed till the echoes rang—and brought you both down upon us as you may remember, full of insatiable curiosity; and then it was too late to mend my broken china."

He groaned again and suddenly cackled, then fell to cackling between groans.

"Next day she actually begged my pardon with tears in her eyes. And there the matter stands. If I pop she laughs, if I don't pop she cries!" He groaned and cackled alternately. "So I have given it up in despair until another time. I've but one decent shred of hope. She told me she is writing a book—something in the Persons-I-Have-Met style —and after it comes out, if it ever does, she will

try to give me a serious answer. In the meantime I shall inflict the Spartan punishment of absence. Accordingly, trek's the word."

This moving tale of the laughing courtship had necessitated checking our horses to a walk. I remarked grimly, "Oh, you will be lucky if you ever see her again," and I saw his face suddenly go white. "If you are as hard hit as I imagine, you had better chuck this thing now before it is too late." I waved my hand vaguely. "We are going on the tallest trek we ever tackled, and it is quite on the cards that we may both be dead men before three months are over. So take my word for it, and chuck it while there is time."

He shook his head doggedly.

"It's no use, Alan. I will go!"

We broke into a gallop and I said no more. He *was* hard hit, harder hit than I had imagined. As for myself, I was in even worse case. There was a terrible, dull ache in my heart, that experience had convinced me there was small hope of ever ceasing to gnaw. Ah, well, we had both chosen heroic measures to kill or cure, and it was more likely to be kill than cure. Doubtless the lady cared as little as I did, one way or the other. I wondered if I should be warranted in writing her, under the circumstances, if only to say a brief farewell? I was almost minded to do it; and fell to pondering on the precise words I should employ. It was a plunge into a lamentable abyss! I had evolved with difficulty a

fine-sounding set of heroic phrases, most of them distinctly morbid in tone, which would fittingly premise my departure from everything stable and correctly inform her of the rate of speed at which I was going to the devil, when I happened to look up and found myself coming into the town.

It was like dropping out of one world into another. There on every side were the symbols of unceasing labor and endless pain; the stress of busy human creatures hurrying so ant-like to their hives to seize the brief respite before to-morrow's sun—half choking the streets; while the long, steady clank of the crushers' stamps beat out its incessant, jarring undertone from the mines, as if to add a grimmer irony to man's little hour of eventide. . . . Why should I murmur more than these? They, too, had their sorrows, no less than their joys and their toil. No, I would not write, I decided. I would hold my peace—and pass out of her life in silence. That resolve came to me after the reaction had set in.

Presently we turned into the shadowy lane leading to our lodgings, cantering by the disreputable rear-view of a dozen jerry-built frame houses, all of them in a shocking state of bad repair, and dismounted at the tall gate of our own house, which was the only one of stone in the neighborhood. But inside the place was very cool and quiet and the rooms were spacious and had oak floorings. I went in and began to take down guns from the rack on the wall without enthusiasm. The first one was a

Mannlicher magazine rifle made in Austria. A pair of heavy English expresses stood just beside it. There was a repeating Savage next to them, throwing the latest explosive bullet, then came four or five business-like Lee-Metfords, the regulation service-arm of the British army. I took them all down mechanically, one after another, and satisfied myself that they were in excellent condition. Then I put them all back again and fell to dreaming bitterly of something very different from rifles—a woman's face!

To Ingulf, the tidings of this new trek and the possibilities which it held out, had come like a reprieve to a captive. He had toiled Homerically in the mine, and to do him justice, none labored more willingly than he. But his heart was not in it. He was a fighting-man pure and simple. The hot blood of a score of Berserk ancestors ran in his veins, and I had watched his eye kindle while I was handling the fire-arms in the rack. At last he could contain himself no longer, and, taking down the great claymore from its hook on the wall, he began to play with it in an absent-minded way. Presently he was scouring it with ashes from the fireplace until the long blade fairly glittered in the fading light.

"What are you doing with that murderous thing?" I asked sharply.

He looked up with a blood-curdling grin.

"A man must do something, Baas, to pass away

the time," he answered. "I am only cleaning the rust from the steel."

I left him there, fondling the great sword in the twilight, and went in to dress for dinner, for it was drawing on toward evening, and we had agreed to dine with Rhodes at eight o'clock. It was not every night one dined with a Cecil Rhodes. I found Sherry already dressing in the midst of a great flare of lights. We had, between the pair of us, thrown away a tidy sum for evening clothes brought out direct from London. After to-night they would be quite useless to us where we were going. Yet it is remarkable what a metamorphosis clothes make in the man. When we had turned ourselves out in them complete and glanced at our reflections in a tall mirror, we might have been a pair of new-fledged millionaires so far as outward appearance went.

We were ushered into a private room of the Rand Club punctually at eight by Stokes, the club's head servant.

"'E's been 'ere nearly 'arf an hour, sir," whispered that worthy, *sotto voce;* "and 'e sent out for a gorgis spread. My eye! Split me if 'e 'asn't spoke for heverything in the books! 'Eaven 'elp us—*and* the hextra dry! . . ."

We passed an acquaintance here and there with a brief nod of recognition. There was Lanham's fighting jaw, the tall leader on 'Change, a post which spoke volumes in Johannesburg in those days; and Tilstone, an immaculate fashion-plate sipping a green

cocktail, and old Allison of the Bonanza Mine. Their eyes widened into a long stare of surprise as we quietly vanished behind the forbidden door, on the other side of which, as they had been at some pains to note, the most famous man in Africa awaited us.

Rhodes was not alone. By him sat a thin, wiry man who kept his head cocked habitually to one side, like a bird's, with an expression of amazing alertness. He was middle-aged and rather jerky, with a rusty, parchment-colored skin all seamed and traced by hundreds of fine wrinkles, like some cracked and ancient map, and a tremendous nose with a high bridge —quite the biggest nose we had ever seen on a human countenance. It made him look like some enormous yellow parrot. He had a queer, birdlike mouth—I found out afterward that it was merely due to the loss of his teeth. He wore a pair of huge steel-framed spectacles with bisected lenses. They were without exaggeration at least double the ordinary strength and thickness. Through them his little gray eyes looked as green as sea-water. I think he was the most extraordinary-looking person I ever saw. At least he was the ugliest.

One glance at the man's great nose, and Sherry had sprung in and seized him by the hand.

"Dr. Eric Ivarsson, by all that's sacred!" he cried, wringing his arm nearly out of its socket. The lean man winced horribly at first and tried to wriggle

out of his grasp. His warped features lit up in a smile that was positively ghastly.

"Slowly, my young friend!" he gurgled. "Hold not so hard—your fingers seem made of steel. *So!* that is better. And what brings you here? Not the service of science nor the spell of dead men's Sagas!"

He mumbled that word "science" very reverently in his bass voice, and a great dignity came into his grotesque face. It gave him a strong likeness to some shockingly bad gargoyle.

"No, you do not care enough for dead men's bones! . . . But to Eric Ivarsson they are otherwise —these things, these histories of dead epochs, dead civilizations, crypts, tombs, old scrolls, the silence of buried cities that lie ruined and forgotten in the ghostly shadows of their inextinguishable past! Listen, young friend! From England to Africa is a long stalk for the other half of a Saga. But I seek the half they wrote with their swords, not that on parchment. When I have found it I will write such a pamphlet, it may be, as will consume my archæological colleagues with envy."

Cecil Rhodes said with a slightly ironic smile:

"I hope you may find it, my friend. But you have come to the wrong shop to look for those things. I may say, gentlemen," he added, "that Dr. Ivarsson is my oldest friend at Oxford, who has long since written me urgently to ask for an escort to a part of

Africa that he wishes to explore. I fear that he is not a practical man. But how could I refuse an old friend of twenty years' standing? And as our interests all lie in the same region, I had thought that perhaps— But Captain Severn shall decide."

He wheeled around on me questioningly.

I said stiffly, "Dr. Ivarsson is welcome to our escort, such as it is." I did not see fit to mention what we knew, or rather conjectured, of Ingulf and his mysterious origin. But I had my own reasons for being silent; and Sherry, in the cold presence of greatness, found Ingulf's ravings too mad a tale to unreel.

Rhodes too must have seen how mad it was to burden what must be a dangerous march into the unknown heart of Africa with that wizened and ancient gargoyle of an Oxford professor, bent on his crazy quest. That was why he had given me a chance to refuse, but a chance that he had adroitly made impossible for me to grasp. The presence of this famous archæologist of his would lend the enterprise a pseudo-scientific atmosphere—he knew that too. He, Cecil Rhodes, would remain discreetly in the background. It was all a preconceived design, perhaps. So I reasoned then. There came a day when I realized how vastly both Rhodes and myself had underestimated the professor's powers.

The obsequious voice of Stokes broke in:

"The dinner waits, your Hexcellency!"

It was worth remembering, that dinner! Rhodes

had ransacked the town. He had unearthed unheard-of delicacies, things that stamp the *bon vivant;* and there in a corner stood a row of buckets full of cracked ice, from which protruded the long slim necks of champagne bottles. The brand was a famous one—dry Monopole. All this princely profusion rather astonished us, for we had heard much of his simple way of life at Groote Schuur. But the man was a mass of contradictions.

He told us some witty stories of his college life, and I was astounded to learn that this man, in the midst of his enormous financial cares and his great undertakings could still find time to make periodical voyages to England and keep up an arduous course of study, solely in order to take his degree at Oxford! Before he had finished telling them the champagne began to flow like water. We developed a new respect for the professor's powers when we saw him empty three bottles of dry Monopole in easy succession. It seemed to have no more effect on him than so much cold tea.

It was late when Cecil Rhodes arose, holding, through the blue cigar smoke, a brimming goblet in his big white hand that never trembled. He looked at us intently as if to probe our hearts, and lifted his glass with a gallant gesture.

"To the new Africa," he said, "and to old England!"

We drank the toast; and he handed me two sealed documents. "One of these is the grant I spoke of.

The other is your commission as captain in the Rhodesian forces. Use it when the hour is ripe. Nothing must appear to emanate from England; in that event you will be promptly disowned. Trek with as few men as possible; too many draw suspicion. One thing more, the Matabele are afoot again—Khama's people are in another scare. But you are white men, and they know the white man's retribution! . . ."

PART THIRD

IBRAHIM'S MAP

CHAPTER X

ENTER RAOUL DE ROQUEMORT, ADVENTURER

IT was just after dawn, and the endless sea of rolling landscape stretched away and away in front of us like some Titanic panorama made lurid and spectacular by the dropping flashlights of the sunrise. Nearly seven weeks had passed; and the scene has changed from the teeming streets of the big South African gold town to the wild silence of the Karroo—a silence intensified by the weird, droning hum of countless insects and punctuated, at long intervals, by the snake-like hiss of the *sjambok,* or ox-whip, and the cries of the Kaffir drivers.

I watched the great crimson ball of the sun roll up above the far away mountain-crests, and idly wondered if somewhere out in that vast expanse which seemed so peaceful, so silent, and so remote, the red work of the *assegai* was going on? It would be strange if it were not—life was so cheap in Africa! We had seen the marshes of the Limpopo fade behind us, and for many days had been pushing northward into the heart of the Matabele country. A blight of savagery seemed to lie upon the land like an ancient curse. Once or twice we had passed

Mashona *kraals* craftily perched high up on frowning cliffs, for the Mashona lived in perpetual fear of their remorseless neighbors, the Matabele.

The grim "*Vae victis*" of the Roman conqueror was the rule, and to trek through that country was like walking arm-in-arm with fate. Any fine day you could expect to look in casually on the charred ruins of some raided *kraal* and see the victors wave you an affable good morning over the ripped-up corpses of the vanquished—it was unhealthy to meddle in local quarrels. But we counted on the Englishman's proved immunity, which was good as letters of marque anywhere north of the Limpopo River. As Rhodes had said, they knew the white man's retribution. Why is it that the naked accident of a white skin commands the incomprehensible respect of dark races the world over? We were not many—three Europeans and less than half a dozen retainers, to-wit: one Ingulf, or Ingulfa, whatever his name was, who had come from nobody knew where; two Bechuana "*voortrekkers*," Makona and Imbete by name, who had served a year together in the Bechuanaland Police; and a rascally Mozambique Arab named Mustapha, whom we had picked up in Johannesburg at the eleventh hour. But we were well armed with magazine-rifles that were the pick of the arms of precision of the world.

Ingulf stuck to the great claymore of Dougall MacDougall; night or day, it never left him. He never appeared to mind its weight, which would have

been irksome to another in that blighting climate. It might have seemed a ludicrous anachronism, but for a subtle quality of vague ferocity.

Mustapha was a tall, hook-nosed, full-blood Arab with a pronounced cast in one of his eyes and a shady past; he had been a slaver in his day—and more. He had drifted down to Johannesburg as a refugee from the dubious justice of Mozambique, where he had lately killed his man in a street brawl—some villainous, half-caste Portuguese. I gathered that the provocation had been particularly terrible. . . . We took him, past and all, because of a single indispensable qualification—Mustapha was reputed to be a dead shot. The two Bechuanas knew how to handle a rifle too, thanks to their year in the Constabulary.

And Ingulf—who and what was Ingulf? To that question, even Dr. Ivarsson, who had adroitly wormed from us by degrees all that we had pieced together of his mysterious origin, could return no satisfactory answer. He used to sit sometimes by the hour, nights in camp, and watch Ingulf across the firelight from between half closed lids as if fascinated, with his head cocked on one side. But Ingulf's unfathomable face gave no sign that he heeded, and he never babbled in that other tongue of his. What did he know? What vague, inscrutable and martial memories lay slumbering behind that somber mask?

But the dim gray line of the Matoppo Mountains

crept nearer. That day we brought up short on the wrong side of a broad river, one of the southerly offshoots of the Zambesi. Westward a shadowy rampart of frowning black cliffs lay upon the horizon. A mile below, the river widened into a great marsh with treacherous yellow quicksands. How to get across was the riddle we had to read—the river must have been alive with crocodiles. But we despatched the Kaffirs in opposite directions to look for a ford, and as the day was well advanced, concluded to camp here on the rising ground, which Ingulf's practised eye singled out at once as a fine natural position for defense in an evil country.

The place was a natural fortress backed by the river, its approaches being very steep and its top quite flat and level, like the top of a giant table. A ring of huge boulders roughly encircled the summit, so regularly placed at even distances apart that they seemed like grim bastions of some forgotten fort, as if they had been set there by the nameless hands of man. It would have been futile to conjecture what race of men might have rolled those colossal blocks in line, yet it was a position that an army would have found difficult to storm. In two hours one of the Kaffirs returned with the news that he had found a good ford some five miles up the river, a broad, shallow place with low banks where we could cross without difficulty in the morning. That tidings set our doubts at rest.

Afterward—for the day was not yet gone—I

walked down the river-bank alone, absently picking up one of the rifles as I passed by the wagon. It was a Mannlicher of the military pattern chambering only five shots, but it would serve as a pretense for intending to try for a shot at water-buck. We had noticed the spoor of these animals near the camp; and, without gun-bearer or other supply of ammunition than the contents of a Colt's revolver, I slipped away from the noisy camp, longing only for silence and solitude to stifle the hopeless ache of my unwelcome thoughts. The black spell was on me again; the reaction had set in, bitter and gray; and the beautiful, starry face that had haunted all of my waking dreams rose up in my tortured brain, mocking me with its trooping memories of other days.

For an hour I went on mechanically, following the river eastward to the fringe of the great marsh, but finally turning aside toward a grassy upland in the distance where I could make out a number of large antelopes quietly feeding along a green slope. The sight of them awoke my sporting instincts. They were eland—the finest antelope in Africa. Unluckily, what wind there was blew straight to them, and there was nothing for it but to make a long detour. I began to stalk them deliberately, and at last had worked round to a covert not more than three hundred yards away, when, taking a tall fellow broadside-on, I stood up suddenly and fired two shots into the center of the group. For the moment the reek of the black powder blinded me, blown back in

my eyes by the wind, then I caught the short slap of the bullet, as clear as the stroke of a cricket-bat.

At the second discharge, the tall buck had sprung into the air and gone down kicking, while the rest made off at astonishing speed. At this I ran forward to make sure of him, pumping another cartridge into the chamber. But another beside myself had been silently stalking that particular herd of eland, and did not intend to be cheated of his rightful prey.

Before I had got within ten yards of the eland a tremendous roar woke the echoes, and out of a small clump of bushes on the farther side of me bounded the most enormous black-maned lion I had ever seen, alighting upon the shoulders of the fallen buck. An instant later another lion hardly any smaller came bounding out of a neighboring thicket and stalked up to Number One, where he suddenly paused stock still and stood eyeing the first fellow in a dignified manner but not offering to dispute possession of the eland.

I shrank back dismayed, while both lions stood as still as stone. Just then the black-maned one lifted his head and uttered a succession of appalling roars. There was something indescribably majestic in his mien as he stood sounding his grim challenge. The other brute still stood as if rooted in his tracks, but he now began nervously lashing his sides with his tail.

But it was never the way of the Severns to give

up a quarry, or to yield an inch to man or beast. At the worst I had still an extra shot, and at that distance it was nearly impossible to miss. And so, seeing what a magnificent target the black-maned fellow presented standing there with his head up, I brought the foresight of the Mannlicher deliberately down onto the center of his mighty chest, let it tremble to a dead rest, and pressed slowly on the trigger.

The report of the shot rang out like a clap of thunder on the quiet air, for the lion had suddenly stopped roaring. The smashing impact of the ball knocked him backward off the eland, but recovering himself and gathering his mighty muscles together, right up into the air he sprang, straight at my throat. I was horribly astonished—I had expected nothing of the sort. But luckily I had the presence of mind to bound back a pace, with the result that the lion fell a few inches short. Before he could spring again, I had sent another bullet crashing into him. That shot finished him. With a last terrific roar that rang in shattering echoes till the air fairly shook, his great head sank—and he was dead.

I had barely time to wheel and throw my last cartridge into the breech before the other lion was up and at me. He sprung without warning, out of a dead silence. I had a brief vision of two blazing yellow eyes set in a monstrous brute face, of wicked white fangs and a long tawny form traveling toward me with terrible swiftness, as if thrown by a power-

ful springboard. He shot right across a twenty-five-foot parabola.

I met him with a raking snap-shot in mid-air as he rose to the apex of the curve. The semi-spherical bullet ranged upward from the flank and traveled clean through him—for the Mannlicher is famous for its heavy driving-power—but it never stopped him. I had used the only shell in the magazine. It was my last shot!

But I knew an old lion-hunter's trick worth knowing—one of those rash but amazingly simple things that men pick up now and again in bizarre ways; outgrowths of a brazen familiarity with death in many forms. Before the echo of the shot died away I had dropped to a crouching attitude and glided a short pace forward, whipping out my revolver.

I felt a blast of red-hot air actually scorch my neck as the lion passed over me, clearing me by not more than four inches! Even then I could have finished things with a couple of shots from the heavy Colt's, had not the little god of chance which forever dogs men's footsteps intervened. In the act of wheeling to fire, my foot caught fast in some tough creeping vine, and down I went headlong among some loose stones. The revolver was knocked spinning. With a short, coughing roar, the lion was upon me, the sheer weight of his enormous bulk nearly driving the breath from my body.

I was conscious, but a dark mist stole over my senses, like a London fog of the last density. I

seemed to exist in a world of shadows. I could see the twinkling lights of Trafalgar Square flickering through the fog, the dim façades of tall buildings, and fancied I heard the hoarse cries of the link-boys and the whirr of heavy four-wheelers—I had been to London once when a boy, and the grim modern Babylon had left its indelible impression photographed in some forgotten corner of my memory. In this awful hour, at this amazing moment, it all came back!

I lay on my side between the lion's paws. I had no wish to rise. One blow from one of them would have crushed my skull like a rotten egg-shell. I must have known that dimly. Why he did not instantly crunch out my life with one fatal bite at the base of the neck, I could not understand—unless his brute instinct scented peril. He lifted his head then, and growled in a menacing way. There was a moment of absolute silence, out of which I distinctly heard a cool, quiet voice saying astonishingly:

"Lie perfectly still, Monsieur. . . . I will fire into the lion's eye!"

A deafening explosion rang in my ears. I felt a swift, convulsive shiver shake the lion's frame. He reared straight up and toppled over backward without a sound. He was stone dead.

I awoke from my dream. A man in European dress, carrying a rifle and wearing a pith sun-helmet, had stepped quickly into view out of the long *tambouki* grass, followed by a second figure similarly

equipped but with a swarthy, black-mustached visage —evidently a Portuguese. Then came three gigantic natives with big shovel-headed spears, and lastly a little Hottentot leading a magnificent hound. The leader came straight up to me, glancing quickly to right and left as he came on.

I staggered unsteadily to my feet and held out my hand.

The stranger was a dapper, small man, apparently about thirty-five years of age, and rather below the medium height, but with a singularly lithe and compact figure clad in a khaki shooting-suit of continental cut. He had quite a grand air and his gestures were ridiculously polite. He wore a little dark waxed mustache and a pointed imperial. His eyes were dark, too, and he had handsome hands, very firm and white and sinewy. He waved them a great deal.

"*Morbleu!*" he said at length, "so you ran out of cartridges? *Quelle dommage!*" He stared at me very hard. "May I ask if Monsieur is much hurt?"

"A few scratches, I believe," I replied briefly. There was really nothing the matter with me. I was miraculously unharmed. After awhile I said, "But I owe you my life, you know. I am very grateful——"

"*C'est rien*—it is nothing!" he interrupted hastily. "Raoul de Roquemort needs no thanks for so small a thing. I was drawn here by the sound

of your firing; I have a camp on the river yonder near the marsh, and was hunting near this place. But you, Monsieur—you are ill, I think. Shall I not assist you to reach your camp?"

"It is not far——"

I must have reeled a little. I felt sick and dazed. He passed me his hunting-flask, with the monogram in silver: a double R interlaced, and beneath it the device in Latin:

NE PRO PECUNIA

Then I took a deep pull at the flask. It was brandy, of better stuff than the motto. My strength came back. . . .

It suddenly dawned on me that this Raoul de Roquemort was the French adventurer against whom Cecil Rhodes had warned me—the hired emissary of Leopold. . . . In the shock of that revulsion I handed back the flask as though the touch of it scorched my fingers. Rhodes had called him "a preposterous duellist"—a ruined gamester. By every canon of common sense the man should have been my enemy. And he had saved my life!

To hide my confusion, I turned to look at the lion he had killed. The brute's left eye was completely shattered; the Frenchman had kept his word. He had fired into the lion's eye at fifteen paces with an express rifle.

I looked up and met his dark eyes fixed upon me quizzically.

"Will you honor me with your name, Monsieur?"

I was suddenly ashamed of myself. "My name is Severn," I said, "Alan Severn."

He smiled very slightly and inscrutably. I wondered what he knew, what knowledge of my mission, of myself, of my secret purpose, that faintly smiling mask of his handsome, cool face concealed?

"I've heard of you," I went on at random. "You're the Marquis de Roquemort. I sent you a cable announcing the misfortune of your cousin, René Duval."

"I received it, Monsieur. And you had my answer?"

"Yes; everything has been kept. There is also a matter of five hundred pounds that was paid to me before we trekked—money that, as things turned out, I did not feel entitled to retain. I have deposited this sum to your credit in the Bank of Africa."

He said unexpectedly, "I cannot accept it. Your feeling does you credit, Monsieur. But my poor cousin was ever rash—of a great recklessness. Why should you be the loser? The money must be withdrawn."

"Poor René. . . . So brave—so fine!"

He shuddered a little and bared his head.

I nodded an astonished assent. The man was rapidly becoming an enigma to me. He seemed quite overcome. It was all very inconsistent, tak-

ing him at what he stood for, at what I knew him to be—Leopold's hireling. And yet I felt strangely drawn to him; there was something direct and genuine in his emotion. I began inviting him to come to my camp with me.

De Roquemort made a rapid sign to one of his black retinue, and the man came forward from the background and shouldered my empty rifle. At a low order which I did not catch, a second black turned and vanished silently in the tall grass. It was easy to see that this man had the born faculty of command. Another native began to skin the dead beasts with a huge knife. Then, with Señor Torres the Portuguese, and the Hottentot with the hound, we made our way to the camp.

Dr. Ivarsson and Sherry stood staring at us from the brow of the plateau, the professor's weird face silhouetted in crimson against the sun. He looked like some frightful Chinese idol looming twenty feet above us. The others stared too; they evidently never had seen any one so ugly. That hideous countenance seemed to fascinate them. I remember to this hour the surprised expressions of their faces. We went up then, and I did the honors for the polite Marquis.

Afterward I told them the whole story.

De Roquemort quietly waved aside a dozen florid compliments with a single shrug.

"Ah, that!" he said. "The little god of destiny!"

He was something of a mystery—that man. A glamour of adventure, romance, duels, gaming, the love of women, a general devil-may-care gallantry, hung about him. I could make nothing at all of his motive when a little while later he made me an astounding proposal. It was to travel in company as far as the Equator; for reasons of safety, he said. He had inquired where we were bound and I had put him off with a cock-and-bull story of central African exploration, to which the presence of Dr. Eric Ivarsson lent color enough.

He had a tidy escort of Swahilis armed with Martini-Henrys—ex-slavers, I guessed at once. United we could bid defiance to anything short of a Matabele Impi, he went on. There was some truth, too, in what he said. The upshot of it was that I fell in with his offer. How could I say no to a polite French gentleman who had saved my life? And I had to confess that I liked the man; he was a fine companion for an adventurous trip.

But it put me in an anomalous position. I seemed fated to be jettisoned among a lot of people all more or less mysterious. De Roquemort was a living puzzle. And Ingulf was a human riddle. Sherry too had the secret preoccupation of his love affair; its disappointments, its passages, which he lived over constantly to himself and in which he let me have no share. Mustapha, dark, tragic, taciturn, lived apart in a sleepy *houri*-haunted trance that hinted at unguessed-of experiences which nobody cared to

duplicate. Even Dr. Ivarsson with his different aims, hopes, and aspirations, and his chimerical quest, was touched with the bar of shadow. The two Bechuanas, sitting cross-legged in the firelight of long evenings, played an interminable native game; nameless, as ancient as the human race; with little cabalistic white bones and meaningless circles in the sand. There was mystery in that, too.

And all these bizarre and unstable threads of opposite lives, so strangely brought together, faded miraculously at the bare touch of those human necessities which level the most various types of men to a common plane. Even Mustapha lost his tragic air at supper and became a commonplace and rather dirty Arab servant, bolting eland steaks; and afterward an evil son of the Prophet, guzzling forbidden liquors out of a battered tin cup.

De Roquemort straightened his dapper, lithe shape against the firelight and lit a monogrammed cigarette which he extracted from a handsome gold cigarette-case. He tossed me the case, it had the same double R interlaced which I had seen before; and the ironic Latin motto. I knew the man must have come of a great family to have such things. Why should he risk his life in Leopold's base pay? He smoked awhile in dreamy silence. Suddenly he said:

"*Camarades,* have you ever heard of a mountain known as the 'Mountain of the Skull'?"

He had lowered his voice mysteriously.

"I have heard of something of the sort," I said, remembering the sea-king's Saga. "Nobody ever got there. The thing is pure imagination."

"You are mistaken, *camarade,* the thing exists, and, unless I die, I have sworn to reach that mountain. *Eh bien,* I will not conceal from you that there is something else—a confidential mission; but of that I do not speak, you understand. . . . Enough that I kill two birds with one stone. Now, *mes amis,* look at this!"

He unbuckled a money-belt from his waist—a belt heavy with French gold—and from a separate compartment took an object which he handed to me in silence. It was a lump of reddish virgin gold weighing at a rough guess six or seven ounces. The strange thing was that it was wrought or molded with startling realism into the fantastic semblance of a human skull.

"Where did you get that?" we cried.

De Roquemort's dark eyes fairly glittered as he answered:

"From a drunken slaver at Beira." He paused. "I have seen Arabs and Arabs," he resumed reflectively, "but never one whose nerves had gone all to pieces like this fellow's. He was all broken up over something he had seen; haunted by a horror. Naturally enough he took to *hashish.* It polished him off in a week—*sacre!* I was with him when he died.

"Ibrahim was one of my recruits—or would

have been if he had lived. The man had a peculiar value to me; he knew more about the dark heart of Africa than any man on the whole coast. He had just come out of the interior—shattered, half starved—a nervous wreck; and I picked him up gloriously drunk and babbling in guttural Arabic of things that stirred my curiosity—I had learned the tongue years ago in Tangier. . . . 'Fiend of Darkness!' he was saying, 'there is one God and Mohammed is his Prophet!' Then, 'Go back! . . . Go back to your pit under the Skull-Mountain—let the *Giaour* who journeys thither find you there.' He had got an idea in his head that I was going there. I don't know how. It is true that I was looking out for men. 'Worshipers of Eblis,' he said, 'Allah's curse be on your gold!'

"Then he pulled that out of his *burnoose;* it is pierced as you see, and he wore it around his neck. Afterward he fell in a gasping heap.

"Of course I called some of my men and had him carried away. I put him in a private hut with an old native nurse, hoping he might live to be of service to me, but he didn't. It took him a week to die, and it was frightful to hear him rave. And little by little I pieced his story together.

"He had been off on a slave-hunting trip beyond Lake Rudolf—the farthest he had ever got into the interior—and he had fallen in with a great tribe of 'devil-worshipers' who had a white King. Yes, a white King. . . . He raved of the attack on

the slavers which this King led in person, armed with a huge axe. He had a red beard, and raged wherever the fight was thickest, crying out terribly in a strange tongue——"

"The Berserk rage!" Dr. Eric Ivarsson broke in with the voice of conviction. "It was the descendant of the Vikings! . . . *The Saga is coming true!*"

The Marquis looked around.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Ingulf was listening intently, and his face wore the puzzled look of a man who is struggling to recall the past. In his eyes the light of memory glowed and faded. A vague, bewildering eruption of many words flowed from the old archæologist. He was describing his excavations in Iceland. De Roquemort listened wonderingly, then he took up his tale.

It was a strange scene: the tense group in the blazing firelight; the set faces; the many nationalities; the naked forms of the Kaffirs in the background, with their coarse, cruel, somber, half-brutal faces—all listening to this Jules Verne sort of a yarn from the lips of that gilded, indomitable scion of one of the first families of France.

"They were taken two days' journey to a place walled in by great mountains. At its entrance stood a scarred volcanic peak shaped like a colossal skull. There was some devilish god they worshiped—'God of the Skull.' Then . . . To that

god they were sacrificed—one each day. Ibrahim's turn came last. With ropes on a windlass, they let him down into an awful pit. He was half-way down before his eyes got accustomed to the semi-darkness—before he saw that the bottom was littered with the bones of dead men. Standing upright in the gloom below was the *Horror*—reaching up to clutch him!

"He swooned at the sight and knew no more until he found himself back on the stone platform at the pit's mouth with the big white King standing over him, angrily cursing the others and pointing to the distant mountains. Yes, the white King saved him—that he might take the tale with him. They tied that thing around his neck and let him go. Six months later he reached the coast a raving wreck."

The Marquis stared silently into the fire, like one who is lost in reveries. Presently he shrugged his shoulders with a gesture indescribably sad. We heard him mutter:

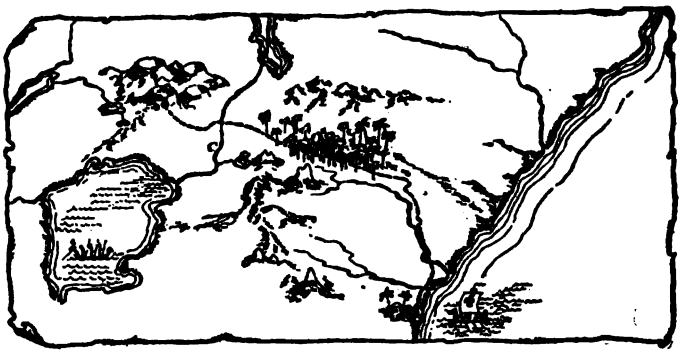
"The fortunes of my house are broken. The France of the Tricolor is dead . . . I, Raoul de Roquemort, am an anachronism! Even that gold is nothing! *Kismet*—so be it! There is gold for all!"

He looked at us with narrowed eyes.

"My friends," he said suddenly, aloud, "you shall trek with me, if you choose. I will make you all rich beyond your dreams . . . *Voila!* I will

not hide from you that my motive is selfish—I have a great regard for my skin. As for Señor Torres here, he is in my pay. But you are Englishmen and men of parts, and four are safer than one. In any case our paths all run together. Now look at this—it is the map which Ibrahim drew for me of his route to the coast."

He took from a compartment of the money-belt what looked at first glance like an oblong strip of the Nile papyrus, but which was in reality nothing but a piece of dried sheepskin tanned very thin and covered with a crude sketch done with some bluish pigment, of which the following is a fac-simile:



Ibrahim's Map

"Ibrahim had his lucid moments, too. In one of them he made me that map. But he never told me what it was he saw down there. 'Forget that abode of evil—*Effendi!*' he would say shudderingly,

and he would rave of all the ghouls of Shaitan. 'Fiend of darkness!' . . . It haunted him till the hour he died."

We shuddered.

"The man was raving mad," I said. "The whole thing is some opium-born dream of the Arabian Nights."

De Roquemort smiled inscrutably.

"Ah, well, we shall see. Africa is a strange continent, full of queer possibilities." A murmur of voices in villainous Arabic came out of the darkness. He added calmly—"My men have come up. . . ."

The new arrivals, who numbered nearly three score, were as disreputable a crew of piratical-looking Arabs as one could conceive, and they had brought with them several donkeys burdened with something long and dark-looking, concerning which their master vouchsafed no explanation. They wore flowing white *burnooses* and carried Martini-Henry rifles, and the word "slaver" was written suggestively on every one of their dark, hawk-featured faces. But they came in peace under the banner of our new ally.

CHAPTER XI

"IN THE NAME OF GOD!"

BY daylight I had a look at one of the dark-looking things which the donkeys transported, and saw the ugly black muzzle of a machine-gun. I turned from my investigations in time to meet the easy stare of Raoul de Roquemort, its owner.

"A Maxim," he said coolly. "A little irregular, if you like—carrying field ordnance into the territories of a friendly protectorate. *Voila!* 'Tis all beneath the rose! . . ." He laughed candidly. "Ah, well, *camarade,* this is Africa, not Europe."

I nodded without replying, and together we turned and watched the sun rising over the Matoppo Mountains. It was the last sunrise that many of us were ever to see in an earthly sky. For as we stood gazing at the red glory of the scene, we became aware that the sunlight was glancing on a moving forest of shining light-flashes in the north.

"What do you make of that, *mon ami?*"

I looked again, and there in the north the bright moving flashes danced and glittered. To mistake its meaning was impossible. I had seen that sight

in Lobengula's day. It was the sunlight shining upon a marching Impi's spears.

"It is a Matabele Impi," was my answer, "and if I am not mistaken we are in for something tremendous."

"So I think also," the Marquis said quietly. "What say you, shall we mount the guns?"

In ten minutes both of the guns were in position at the brow of the hill, and Torres, who had served on a Portuguese gunboat in his younger days, stood by, with a significant nod to a big coal-black Soudanese. Then the Marquis said a few words to one of his men, and the man presently brought forward a black oblong box like a duelling-case. It was covered in shiny morocco leather, and the gilded crest with the enigmatic Latin motto was again in evidence. De Roquemort proceeded to open the box, while I watched him curiously. Suddenly the lid flew back, and there, snugly reposing on their bed of purple plush, lay as pretty a pair of toys as I had ever seen. They were long keen duelling rapiers made of the finest Toledo steel.

To my astonishment the Marquis selected one of them and strapped it on with the most matter-of-fact air in the world. Then he turned to me.

"Will you have one, Monsieur?" he asked. "Unless I make a great mistake we shall need them soon, and at close quarters they are superb!"

"No, thank you," I returned, "keep your toys and take my advice—put that thing back and take

a rifle instead. You will find it more to the purpose."

De Roquemort laughed carelessly, but something in his mirth gave me a cold chill.

"Every man to his liking," he said easily. "Mine is for the rapier in a mêlée." Then he shut the box again with a polite shrug, and we turned our attention to the oncoming Impi.

As we watched, spellbound with wonder and awe, what few doubts we may have had as to its nature were soon dissipated, for presently the advancing cloud resolved itself into dense columns of dark-faced warriors carrying spears and broad shields of ox-hide. There were about five thousand of them as nearly as we could judge; evidently they had crossed the river at night by the ford some five miles above.

Then, as I looked again, I rubbed my eyes in astonishment, for I had caught sight of the white flutter of a woman's dress amid the dark ranks of soldiers. A white woman! . . . What would a white woman be doing there? The sunlight glanced from a man's pith helmet. My brain was reeling in a whirl of bewilderment. A moment afterward, I rubbed my eyes again, very hard this time, for the white, fluttering garment out there in the plain was swiftly dividing like the fabled hydra, and becoming three instead of one. There were three white women and a white man! Who were they? Could it mean that they were prisoners? Heaven

help them if that was so, for help from us was hopeless. What could we do against a whole regiment of the bravest savages in Africa? I knew the fighting qualities of the Matabele. A wave of pity surged over me—tears unexpectedly came into my eyes, blotting them all out.

But what Impi was this and where was it marching? Many voices arose then in a babel of inquiry.

As though in answer, over the rise to the north there suddenly came plunging a frantic roan horse with the figure of a man in the saddle clad in the semi-military uniform of the Bechuanaland Border Police. He wore a bandolier slung across his shoulders and had a carbine in one hand, and he kept swaying drunkenly in the saddle. The Impi was coming up rapidly behind him, and even at that distance we could make out the broken shaft of a spear sticking in the man's shoulder, and another in the flank of the horse. He came on at headlong speed up the slope.

By some miracle the man kept his seat as the big roan cleared the rock barrier with an amazing leap; but as the maddened horse reared to his haunches in our midst, he slid limply from the saddle and would have fallen had not a dozen eager hands supported him. The roan horse rose straight up once more, with an appallingly human shriek, then convulsively collapsed into a quivering heap. That marvelous uphill jump of his might have won him a steeplechaser's fame in other days; but it had been

the effort of a dying horse—he had made his last leap.

Nobody paid any attention to him. A babel of voices in many keys and half a dozen different tongues went on around the wounded trooper. Some one was pouring raw spirits between his teeth—the man seemed ready to swoon. Afterward he revived abruptly and sat up.

"Now, my man," said I, "your news—quick!"

"The Matabele!" he mumbled. "They are marching upon Buluwayo! Despatches . . . ran into their lines at dawn. They gave me this before I could get away—" and he pointed to the broken shaft of the *assegai* sticking in his shoulder.

Some one made a move to draw it out, but his face went perfectly gray in an instant.

"Let it be," he begged. "I'm done for anyway. Just give me another sup of liquor—and I say, light a pipe, somebody, and put it in my teeth. . . . It'll be the last pipe I'll ever smoke on this earth—I'm bleeding inside.

"Those black devils have made some prisoners—three white women and a white man. Picked 'em up at the Zimbabwe ruins, as near as I could make out—man yelped that out as I went through. A regular swell, he was. Poor devil! He's as good as done for, and so am I. A blooming swell, too! . . ."

He rambled on disconnectedly:

"Aye, white women, I tell you. . . . Of course

they'll attack at once. Ha! What's that—a Maxim? Lord, so it is! Rare spree for you chaps! Wish I could be in it. . . . Ah!"

He began to cough monotonously.

"He is right," De Roquemort broke in with one of his French oaths. "Let the spear stay; he will die the easier. His mind is wandering, and he sees an army in the handful here. Let him be, I say; I have seen such things before. He will be dead in an hour."

We gave him some more brandy, which brightened him up surprisingly, and propping him against a rock with a lion skin to his back, we placed the lighted pipe he craved between his teeth. It was a pathetic sight to see him sitting there resignedly, bleeding to death internally while he smoked his last pipe. In an hour, sure enough he was dead, as De Roquemort had predicted, but meanwhile other things were in our minds.

The terrible thought of those helpless women in the hands of the Matabele made our hearts turn sick. We wondered in a vaguely hopeless way who they were. Some party of English sightseers, very obviously, who had been quite unsuspectingly "doing" the famous Mashonaland ruins without a thought of the lurking possibility of being swept up into the terrifying vortex of an unbelievable native outbreak. Of course they would not be killed—white women were never killed by their black captors. They would know a worse fate soon enough.

One shuddered horribly at the abyss which their captivity had so suddenly opened before them. And at last, through sheer necessity, our minds turned to our own peril, for by this time the approaching regiment had come up to within half a mile of us, and we could feel the earth literally quiver and tremble with the tread of their advancing feet.

Presently they caught sight of us, for a deep roar went up from their crowded ranks, and suddenly the Impi executed a remarkable maneuver.

Advancing straight forward within five hundred yards of us, they halted dead. By this time, with the aid of a pair of binoculars we could make out plainly their stern dark faces and martial head-dresses of black ostrich plumes and crane feathers. Through the glass we could see that two of the women at least were quite young; their faces and the figure of the third were thrown into shadow. They were all mounted on riding-donkeys. The man with the sun-helmet was tall even beside the tall forms of the savages around him; he was dressed in khaki like a British officer. There was something unmistakably familiar in his indifferently careless attitude of a spectator.

Then a tall gray-haired officer in front of the line, evidently a general, for he wore a handsome leopard-skin cape and an extra-elaborate head-dress, gave a signal and the dense masses slowly opened up in skirmishing order. Out swung two long thin

lines in a V-shaped formation so as to enclose our camp, coming up to within three hundred yards this time, and leaving us only the river to fall back upon.

We were surrounded.

They halted once more, and several solitary figures came running swiftly up the slope, and ran rapidly to and fro for a few minutes, reconnoitering our position. Then these men returned and reported, and there was a long, inexplicable pause.

Suddenly the Impi closed up.

"Great Heavens!" Sherry said in awestruck tones, "they are going to charge us!"

For a few seconds it certainly looked as though they were, when, to our unutterable relief, the general in command suddenly issued a sharp order, and the long lines wheeled and began to sweep right past us at a rapid trot. It was a magnificent sight to see that martial array sweep by at the run, all in perfect order and without a sound except the trample of their flying feet.

"They are afraid of a snare beyond the hill," a deep voice said at my ear, giving me a sudden start.

It was Ingulf—the light of battle in his eyes! So plainly suggestive was the look stamped on his twitching features that it momentarily fascinated me and almost led me to forget our impending danger.

"They have learned wisdom from Lobengula's war," he went on, "and they go to see what lies

yonder before they attack. But they will be back soon, and in an hour we will all be food for vultures."

I made no reply. I was tensely following the movements of the Impi, and a wild hope had sprung up in my mind that possibly we were not going to be attacked after all—though that was madly improbable. I was aware that Buluwayo lay in the direction which the Impi had taken. Probably its object was to mass around that town in the hope of taking it by surprise, and not waste time on smaller fry. In that case, time was of the greatest importance to the Matabele.

It was an inspiring thought for those unhappy women; there would be negotiations—perhaps even a sortie by the garrison. There were men in Buluwayo who would have risked it with a battery of field guns at their backs. But for us to think of attempting such a thing with our force was sheer madness. It would only have led to the death of all concerned. The Matabele would probably spear the captives, once their blood was up.

I was fated to be rudely undeceived, for having deployed by our position and made sure that no ambuscade lurked beyond the ridge, the Matabele regiment paused and rapidly detached ten companies, each of about one hundred men, to attend to us; while the rest of the Impi marched off at a rapid pace without paying us any further attention. Probably the general in command did not believe

it was worth his while to delay the movements of his whole force in order to destroy so few; for in war, among savages as among civilized armies, the main objective is the thing that counts. And off they went, leaving the others to settle with us and rejoin them later.

"There goes the main body," Sherry sang out nervously from a matter of fifteen yards. "They're off for the capital. And God help Buluwayo when they get there!"

I echoed that wish in my heart, though I was selfishly glad to see them go—not but that the odds were still tremendous enough at fifteen to one! About a thousand men were still left to be dealt with, and that was bad enough.

A burst of ferocious deep-throated cheering went up then from the ten companies left to destroy us. And it was not till then that I marked the fact that the unfortunate captives had been left behind with them. They were being herded together into a saucer-like hollow where they would be shielded from gun-fire by the dipping ground, with four armed and brawny savages to shepherd them. And while I was still trying to grasp the significance of this unexpected pass, I saw a single figure step out of the Matabele ranks and advance slowly up the hill.

He came on alone in perfect silence, with an utter fearlessness that compelled our admiration. A dozen rifles were turned on him before he had gone two-thirds of the way, and he must have

marked those gun-muzzles go up, yet he never paused or faltered.

He was a great splendid-looking fellow, with a necklace of lion's claws and his naked chest all covered with scars, and as he came on steadily and swaggered straight up to the ring of boulders with mangificent *sang froid,* we saw that he was no more than a boy. His dark ferocious features grinned at us across the rocks, displaying a double row of ivories as he rolled his staring eyes round the circle in a soldier-like and sweeping inventory of our strength.

"A strong *kraal,* Englishmen," he said with a laugh at last, "yet I have helped take stronger, and if need be we can take this one too. But first I have something to say that may save us the trouble, and also a message to bring."

He paused, and I pushed my way toward him through the circle.

"Speak on," I said in his own tongue, "but be quick; these men hunger for your life, and I cannot answer for them long. What is your message?"

The Matabele laughed again without a sign of fear.

"My terms first, Englishman, then the message. These are my terms:

"The *Inkulu*—the general—commanding the Impi has sent forth the word that we must have your guns to fight the soldiers of the White Queen on whom we are making war. Yet as this seems a

strong place and we may suffer some loss in taking it, I am willing to give you your lives in return for all your guns and ammunition, otherwise we mean to take both. Give up your guns, and you may take your other goods and go in peace. Stay, I will throw in that other Englishman—him from whom I bear the message. Refuse, and these companies here, which I myself command, will take this place by storm and put you all to the spear. Which shall it be, white men?"

"Give me the message—and we will answer you."

"True—the message." He reached behind his ear for his snuff-box, made from a hollowed bone, which turned out to be quite empty save for a small roll of paper obviously torn from a pocket memorandum such as many tourists carry. The message had been written hastily in pencil. This much I had seen when he had handed it over, without noticing the signature.

"Read the talking-paper—and then speak quick, Englishman—see, the vultures are waiting!" said the captain, with a bloodcurdling leer displaying his double row of ivories.

I read the paper and staggered back, almost overcome by the cold, creeping horror of it.

Dated in the Matoppo Foothills,

on the 4th of March, 18—.

Whoever reads this and will take it to the authorities at Buluwayo or Fort Salisbury will be paid two thousand pounds

in English money upon presenting this paper at the Bank of Africa. The bank is hereby authorized to pay the above sum without identification, and the authorities are begged to equip a relief party at my private expense to attempt the rescue of the following persons who were captured by the Matabele near the ruined cities of Mashonaland on the 2nd of March: — Miss Alline Buckerton, an American tourist, whose exploration of the Zimbabwe Ruins has unfortunately led to our capture, and her aunt, Mrs. Patricia Rountree, of Covington, Ky., U. S. A.; Miss Norma Raylescroft, of Johannesburg, and the undersigned, of Wigmore St., Cavendish Square, London, W. I would recommend a relief party of not less than three hundred men, well mounted, taking with them a mountain-gun or Gatlings, with native guides or English officers of the Border Police.

We are now in the Matoppo foothills, about sixty miles due west of Zimbabwe, on the Sabi River, and will head west-by-north after fording the river. The Matabele at this writing have divided their force, leaving us in charge of only about a thousand men, their main body now marching on Buluwayo.

IN THE NAME OF GOD.

ROBERT PIERS CROYDON, VISCOUNT CHALMES.

I read on swiftly to the end; then at last the writing blurred and swam before my eyes, and for a moment I reeled—I reeled as though I had been suddenly taken with a stroke. I suffered in that moment the literal and convulsive clutch of death at my heart. And no death could have been worse than this white-hot anguish of love.

"IN THE NAME OF GOD!"

All the uncertainty—all the impersonal element, as of shipwrecked people whom one hears of and pities immensely but does not really know after all, was swept away like a calcined veil, like a mesh of cobwebs. *She* was there—in the hands of those dreadful savages. *In the name of God!* It was the most horrible of life's surprises. And Chalmes, too; he had written his message to civilization with characteristic coolness, but he had broken down at the end.

"What is it, man? Who are they?"

Sherry had pressed to my elbow, his face white with excitement. The others were crowding round, jabbering all at once inanely. Only De Roquemort remained calm as a frozen image, but there was a light in his eye that belied his coolness. I thrust the paper into Sherry's hands, and, as he read, saw a slow shudder run through him and his face turn a sickly gray.

"Good God!" he groaned. "What's to be done?"

"Fight," I said, "unless——"

I pulled myself together and turned to the savage, outwardly cool enough. My wits had returned to me, and I had been thinking swiftly.

"And the women," I managed to say carelessly, though my heart was thumping horribly against my ribs as I spoke. "You throw them in also, of course?"

"Not so," the captain replied, frowning. "That

cannot be—the white women must stay. They are the bait with which I must hook some chiefs who have not yet joined us in this war," he added with a leer, "who are sitting still in their *kraals*, where I mean to take them as soon as we have settled with you. Be satisfied with what we offer. Give up your guns before we come and take them. What is your answer, Englishman?"

"Let these men answer for themselves," I said, and nodded meaningly to De Roquemort, who turned to his men and spoke to them briefly in Arabic.

The Arabs listened, staring. Then a derisive, guttural laugh ran down their ranks. Fatalists to a man, they were ready to die with the magnificent "Kismet" of the Koran on their lips—but they would trust their lives to no man, black or white. At that low, guttural laugh, the herald's dusky features flushed with rage, for he had read its meaning in many a dark, sneering face.

"You have their answer," I said significantly, "and this is mine—that Englishmen do not purchase their lives at the price of their women's honor. Go!"

The Matabele laughed ferociously.

"So be it, white man," he cried, shaking his broad spear. "We will fight it out. Farewell—the hyenas laugh last!"

When he had gone the Marquis turned to me coolly.

"Remarkable savages, these fellows! And now, Monsieur, it is time to say our prayers." His lips moved inaudibly. I stared at him in astonishment. He was in fact actually mouthing a prayer. Then I heard him say, "*Quelles bêtes! Et moi, je suis manque.* . . . What an end!" He laughed slightly. "Come, we may as well die hard, *beau sire.*"

He walked off alertly, and in the next three minutes he was everywhere, putting new heart into the men. Fortunately the Impi was very short of firearms, though they possessed a few old rattletraps passing for guns, for the British Government had been peremptory in forcing Lobengula's people to disarm at the end of the last Matabele war. For our part, we could muster some sixty-five men armed with rifles, and the supply of ammunition was practically unlimited—we had upwards of fifty thousand rounds. After all, though the odds were tremendous, we occupied a strong position, which would take some fighting to carry. The Giant's Table commanded the plain on all three sides, the river being the fourth; and it was up this rough rising ground that the foe must come through a raking cross-fire. On the other hand, if this position was once rushed there was nowhere to flee except into the river and the jaws of the crocodiles. And we had no fancy for being forced back into that river.

Strong hands dragged the heavy ox-wagon to the only gap in the great ring of boulders and wedged

it fast; and in my heart I thanked the Fate or Providence that had led us to encamp there instead of in the plain, though it had been an unheroic labor, done on the day before, to the crude accompaniment of a wicked chant of curses from the sweating Kaffirs above the great, dumb heads of the patient oxen, and the pitiless lash of the biting *sjambok*.

At the rear we had ranged the uneasy, shuffling, strangely friendly beasts of burden. They could smell death in the air. They would serve for a buffer between ourselves and the river, to which on that side the plateau fell sharp and sheer.

Torres, the Portuguese ex-gunner, stood by one of the Maxims, and the giant Soudanese, who had been a cashiered artillery-sergeant in Egypt, was told off to the other machine-gun. In addition we had five men armed with spears, Ingulf, and the Hottentot—who was of no account whatever. He sat huddled in the rear, trembling horribly—a picture of abject fear.

I looked down upon the grim black mass of men below, standing rank on rank in their soldierly array, all so stern and quiet in their perfect discipline —the quiet of the lull before the storm!—and shuddered, for I knew that when their blood was up those black soldiers spared no living thing. I wondered how many of us would be alive when that day's work was done. Afterward I drew out a miniature from my bosom and kissed it silently. Try as I would, I had never succeeded in tearing

her image out of my thoughts! For me she was still the one perfect woman, the high and flawless ideal; and the ruling passion is strongest in the shadow of death. The knowledge that she was somewhere out there in front of me—a helpless, impotent captive—only intensified my longing and my love. How could I abandon her to such a fate? But even as the thought leaped in my brain that one of us must try to make a dash for Buluwayo, I saw that it was too late.

Again the thin, crescent-shaped nippers, like the horns of a gigantic beetle, were being thrown swiftly up the flanks of the rising ground. A single glance at the yellow mud-banks of the river, dotted by a hundred grim sentinels, told me that avenue was hopeless. No man or beast could pass that water and live. Below the marsh, the quicksands glittered in the sun. Everywhere else we were held fast by a ring of steel.

Aye, it was too late! So I kissed the lovely pictured face again and put the miniature away. Then I took up my station and waited for the attack.

CHAPTER XII

THE FIGHT OF THE GIANT'S TABLE

THE attack was not long in coming. The captain of the thousand, who, by his leopard-skin cape, could be easily distinguished in front of the Matabele lines—being in fact the same reckless gentleman who had demanded our surrender—had adopted at once the tactics of the gray-haired old *Inkulu*, or general, who had commanded the Impi in the first place.

I saw all at once the flanking lines breaking up in waves at the base of the rising ground like surf upon the beach, and then I saw a sudden massing of men at the horns of the crescent, as they took a formation three deep. The whole movement was affected in business-like silence. The Matabele had merely waited to get their nippers into position to crush us, and this accomplished, with a long roar from a thousand black throats, they charged straight up the hill in a triple line from all three sides at once.

They came on at a fast trot, their fantastic headdresses standing out almost straight behind them as they ran, which gave them a most devilish appearance. They seemed like horrible apparitions. Withholding our fire, we waited in ominous silence.

They were in splendid range, but still we waited, for De Roquemort had settled it to give the signal at the proper moment with a rifle-shot.

On they swept until the triple ranks of fierce set faces were up within a hundred and fifty yards. Still he withheld the signal. Presently they had lessened this distance by half. No sign yet! Seventy yards, sixty-five, fifty, forty—was he never going to give it, I asked myself, and then—*boom!* went the Frenchman's heavy rifle.

"*Fire!*" he sang out, and I saw the Matabele captain fall as though struck by lightning.

Instantly a waving spurt of flame crashed out along the whole semicircle of our line. At that range the effect was terrific—nothing could stand up before it. Men went down in front of it like ninepins. I saw row on row of grim black faces rise to the level of my eyes—and the next instant they were swept away like autumn leaves in a November gale. Four times we fired into the dark mass of men, and the machine-guns tore four great gaps in their ranks, but they closed up instantly and the rush came on.

But the Maxims crashed out again—their rush never reached us. Once more we blew them away with a storm of death. Down went their leader—a tall man with a black feather head-dress, who had taken the dead captain's place—shot through the chest; but another chief instantly stepped forward into his place. Down went numbers of both rear

lines, and down went whole dozens of the first rank like corn before the reaper, some of them spinning over and over down the hill until they brought up short against the living bodies of those who were advancing from below.

It was a hell-blast of destruction! But the hearts of those black soldiers were as strong as oak. And on they came like the grim dogs of war they were, leaping over the bodies of the dead and the wounded, staggering through the hail of bullets, and actually up within fifteen yards.

At this point I began to feel most horribly frightened. Was nothing going to stop them?—I wondered. Fifteen yards more—and then the dreadful ripping-up process, the closing scenes. . . . I glanced around, and there at my elbow, his grotesque face all a-twitch with the fighting spirit of his Viking ancestors, was Dr. Eric Ivarsson blazing away as fast as he could empty the magazine. To see that ancient man of science coolly engaged in potting benighted savages with a Lee-Metford rifle was something to remember.

We waited for perhaps ten seconds for them to mass and come on again before we stopped them with another withering fusillade that, for the moment, turned the scale in our favor. Then from behind me I heard Ingulf's voice:

"They waver—aye, the dogs flee!"

Then I saw the charging lines sullenly roll back down the hillside in confusion, leaving more than

two hundred dead and dying men behind them in the dreadful shambles from which they were evidently glad to escape. But at the foot of the rising ground they formed up again, just out of effective range, and we knew it would not be long before they would hurl themselves at us once more. And who could say what the issue would be then? At close quarters we were no match for them, and not a man of us but knew they would charge again and again until they struck home. What if they managed to rush us? Even the dark faces of the Arabs blanched beneath their bronze at the thought of what would happen to us then, and many a fighting son of Islam called upon the names of Allah and the Prophet under his breath.

Presently after a brief lull, the Matabele officers ran to and fro, closing up their lines. Then with a hoarse roar of fury, they leaped forward again almost as one man. As they came, they shouted out their wild battle-songs in a perfect gale of bass sound that absolutely defies description; while the sun's rays played with a weird effect on the tossing spears, and the wild rush surged forward like the long roll of breakers on some sullen coast.

Before a man could count fifty, they were half way up the hill again. We met their rush with a terrible storm of bullets, and the Maxims sent their rain of death right into the thick of the press of men, plowing a new and more dreadful path among them as fast as they could close up their shattered

ranks. In less than five minutes the whole hillside was a hell of mangled and dying men. And out of that awful inferno of carnage, with a roar, came a swarm of naked black figures leaping at us through a shadowy canopy of smoke.

We let them come on to fifteen yards and then we raked them with a sweeping cross-fire as a north wind sweeps down a field of withered corn.

In their packed formation the result was appalling. Nothing short of an army could have withstood that sort of reception. Once more the Matabele reeled back under that staggering fire and began to fall back in disorder on the plain, until the range grew ineffective—though almost all of the stragglers were put out of the action as they retired. Had their front ranks lived through that charge, this chronicle would never have been written; for the guns had literally grown too hot to handle, and the bandoliers of the Arabs were for the time being all empty. But we had wiped out four companies—nearly half their force. No wonder the foe paused at last to close up their disorganized ranks and gather heart for a final onset, while we on our part seized the brief respite to open fresh ammunition-cases and get ready to receive them if they charged again. Up to this time we had not lost a man, but if the matter ever came to the hand-to-hand stage we knew that our chances would not be worth a broken sixpence.

Then, from his station on the right, I heard Sherry sing out suddenly in awed admiration:

"By George, they are actually going to try it again! Ah, here they come!"

It was a solemn fact, they were; and it was impossible not to admire the iron discipline that could send those splendid savages up to their certain death as coolly as though they had been a lot of soldiers on parade. At last, the affair began to look frightfully serious, for by this time their blood was up. The battle-madness was on them at last—the awful lust to kill—and little they recked of the death that lurked behind the white men's fatal ring. This time they meant that the white men and their Arab allies should all die with them and make an end of it all. But the Matabele had learned a terrible lesson none the less, and for this supreme effort they were wise enough to change their tactics. Spreading out their lines in an irregular open formation like a monster letter U, they came at us in this shape at a jerky but rapid run, so that our fire, while very destructive, lost much of its effect. This enabled them to reach and pass the fifteen yard deadline with a loss of not more than seventy or eighty men; for heavy as our fire was, it failed to stop them.

Men fell thick, but still others sprang forward into their places undismayed, and in the face of all we could do, the rush came on unchecked. In vain

we threw down our smoking rifles and emptied our revolvers into the ferocious, grinning faces, dealing death and wounds with nearly every shot, for at that distance it was almost impossible to miss outright. In the teeth of everything, the Matabele began to mass together for the final swoop—and the last rush had begun.

It was hand-to-hand now, and before five minutes had elapsed, we had lost as many men. If they ever broke through our ring we were as good as doomed.

There was a sudden, short lull; then the fight closed in. At this critical moment Ingulf rose to the emergency like the sea-king's reincarnation. With a roar, he threw himself into the mêlée, armed with the great claymore of Dougall MacDougall.

I saw him hurl himself upon those brave black lines and hew a bloody path right through them to the other side. Then back he raged, like a lion at bay, and cut another red furrow, beating down foe after foe; and every time the great blade of the claymore hissed through the air, a man fell where he stood. Before its crashing sweep, the ox-hide shields of the Matabele were like so much tinder. I saw men's heads go spinning from their shoulders to fall a dozen feet away. And as he fought, he shouted out his battle-cries in a barbaric tongue, until, as I watched him, I thought of the steel-clad warriors of another age.

Presently a tall chief armed with an axe and an iron-backed shield rushed up, with a shout, and engaged him. One stroke of Ingulf's blade shore through axe-haft and arm, and another bit deep into the Matabele's skull. As he stepped over the fallen man, Ingulf stooped and picked up the shield. At this, crying out that a devil in the shape of a huge man had broken in among them, the soldiers immediately in his front, whom the hail of bullets had failed to daunt, broke and fled like sheep from the slaughter before this new and terrible weapon in the hands of their gigantic foe.

So they were cleared away on the right and in front, and we gained a breathing space. But on the side of the Giant's Table where De Roquemort was posted, immediately to my left, the issue still hung wavering in the balance, though the Arabs were making a gallant and stubborn resistance. Fortunately for the defenders, the space available for fighting was so limited that only a few of their foes could crowd upon it at one time, although the pressure from below was terrific and threatened to sweep them all over the bluff into the river. As for the Marquis himself, not in all the space of my days had I ever seen a man fight as he did—or with a more appalling calm.

He had thrown away his rifle now and was using only the rapier, but his use of it and his incredible *sang froid* was a revelation. In the hands of the little Frenchman, that slender and apparently in-

significant but fatal strip of steel was gruesomely transformed into a thing of fear. It seemed as swift, as erratic, and as continuously in motion as a humming-moth on a flower-trellis, and quite as hard to follow; and it lent itself to his purpose as if instinct with life and reason. And the man himself—who can hope to picture him! I had seen men fight hand-to-hand for their lives many times; but never before had I seen one who smiled so astonishingly while he played with death.

He glided to and fro with almost feline swiftness, springing now here and now there, tireless, sure of foot and all but Argus-eyed—there was something positively uncanny in the way he would glide backward out of reach of the short stabbing *assegai's* futile thrust and then back in again and under it straightway with his remorseless yard of steel.

Presently he would pink his man in a vital spot, and, springing over his body, instantly engage another adversary, who would finally go the way of the others, when the Marquis, with the same cold deadly calm, but always smiling his familiar smile, would turn his attention to a new antagonist. No wonder his singular tactics proved so disconcerting to his bewildered foes, for really it gave me a shiver to watch him. I saw him put that amazing toy through five men in the little while that he was near me, before the swirl of the fight took him out of my view.

Then, suddenly, the tide of battle ebbed away

from us for the moment, leaving the whole space clear; and, before any one could stop him, Ingulf had sprung across the gap and made another lion-like rush, hewing down every man in his path.

His Berserk rush was made alone.

There was no support—our five gallant spearmen who had stood outside the rock circle were all dead and ripped up; and the French adventurer with the devil's courage, who also had preferred to take his hand-to-hand mêlées where there was room to swing a weapon, had already regained the rocks unharmed; but his aid would have been too late. I heard the breech-blocks of the Martinis snapping like castanets along the line; the Arabs had seized the diversion to reload. Then from Torres, at the machine-guns, rose a sudden cry:

"Back, Señor—quick! To the rocks!"

Ingulf heard the warning just in time, and, still keeping his front to the foe, began to run backward swiftly. Torres depressed the muzzles of the guns.

In twenty seconds he was behind the rocks in safety, and the Maxims began to sweep the survivors from the brow of the hill. Then the Martinis commenced to spit volleys into them, and, before another minute had sped, the Matabele were utterly demoralized and there began a scene of carnage that was enough to haunt the memory.

The last man to fall on our side was Mustapha, the Arab. All through the fray he had displayed the indomitable courage of his race, and, as it

chanced, was kneeling to open a fresh case of ammunition when, just as the last rally of the foe was beaten back, one great warrior who had disdained to flee from the white man's ring, carried away by his martial ardor, cleared the rock barrier at a single bound and landed fair upon the shoulders of the ill-starred Arab. It was a desperate thing to do, and it cost the soldier his life, but before any one could raise a weapon, the Matabele had driven his broad spear home.

It was the *coup de grâce.* Mustapha rolled over dead without a groan, and, ere the soldier could strike another blow, De Roquemort's rapier was through his throat, and he too fell down and died. It was all over in ten seconds, and in another minute the Matabele were in full retreat.

We had won the day, and as they fell back in confusion the Arabs raised a wild cheer and leaped upon their flanks like tigers.

The rest was butchery. Less than a hundred and fifty blood-bespattered men reached the bottom of that hill alive, and for twenty minutes or more the plain reëchoed with the crash of rifle shots, as the Arabs, whom it was utterly useless to try to restrain, remorselessly turned the last scenes of the battle into a massacre—the old penalty for employing half-savage levies ever since war has been the fashion.

But swift as they were to follow and kill, they were not quicker than I, in that first wild rush when

our turn came to attack. As I dashed on blindly, making for the spot where I had marked the captives guarded before the battle, I soon left them behind, and presently the bullets addressed to our foes began to sing wickedly about my ears. Then the drumming tattoo of footsteps coming up steadily behind me, and not to be shaken off, forced me to wheel, revolver in hand.

It was Sherry, running with his hands low, like a professional sprinter. As he pounded up, I waved my hand silently toward the vanishing flutter of a white dress twenty yards off to the left. He nodded —and then, above the broken fusillade of the Martinis and the awful yells of the Arabs, we heard a woman scream.

The sound lent wings to our feet, and together we swerved toward the cry and dashed forward at redoubled speed. As we ran, a cold lump rose in my throat at the horrible thought that we might be too late, and my heart seemed bursting in my ribs with the tremendous physical strain. Yet, thank God! we were in time to witness a terrifying *tableau*, and to interfere with its fatal conclusion.

What we had taken for a hollow "pan," at the distance of five hundred yards, was the bed of a shallow watercourse hollowed out in the rainy season by a vanished torrent. In the *kloof's* mouth, huddled up together against a rough spur of the crumbling red sandstone, the three frightened women were grouped in a posture of despair—they

might have been posing for a composition designed to typify "*Horror.*" Their black guards, with ruthless determination stamped on their brutal features, were in the act of advancing to spear them.

Just in front of them stood Lord Chalmes, unarmed, but with his guard up like a boxer's, and at his feet the sprawling, rigid figure of the savage whom he had just knocked down. How he had contrived to do it and avoid the Matabele's spear passes belief, though it may not have been a difficult feat for the man who had knocked out the "Auckland Spider."

The guards, seeing the day was lost, meant to murder the prisoners and escape down the *kloof,* but they had been held in check for the moment—they had hardly looked for so effective a resistance from an unarmed man. The man whom Chalmes had hit lay unnaturally still—the blow must have been a fearful one. The others had been thunderstruck momentarily. They had never seen a man knocked out clean with a fisticuff. Then they advanced with uplifted spears to finish their work.

I saw the rest of the drama being enacted swiftly before my eyes. We had come up to them—abominably out of breath—just as the final scene was about to be played out. The two young women screamed again as the fiends advanced on them and lifted their spears. The other one covered her face with her hands at the sight of the cold steel, and stood convulsively shuddering from head to foot.

"Lord Chalmes had thrown himself upon the guards . . . and they were striking at each other in that unequal game"

But Chalmes, possessing himself of the fallen man's spear, had thrown himself upon the foremost of the guards, and the next instant they were striking at each other in that unequal game, to which, though the Englishman was quick as a cat, there could be only one end.

That was what we saw—then our revolvers rang out together, and both of the would-be murderers lay gasping out their lives upon the sand. I had no compunction in killing the third man from behind like a dog; it was no time for the niceties of warfare. At the echo of the shot he threw up his hands and fell down abruptly.

It was Lord Chalmes and not I, who received Norma's swaying figure in his arms as she relaxed all at once and suddenly reeled into his arms when the danger was past. And I, feeling like a spectator of something unapproachable and forbidden, stood watching them without a word to say. I was *de trop,* I saw; and then, as I noted Sherry supporting the American girl with an arm thrown brazenly round her waist, I resigned myself to the task of soothing her aunt, a handsome, fragile-looking woman of forty, with a profusion of very black hair, very big black eyes, and a superbly slender figure that many a girl of twenty might have envied.

That was Mrs. Rountree.

She was quite hysterical, and began thanking me in rather high-flown, stilted phrases that sounded as though they had come out of a paper-covered

novel. I learned from her that the men of her party had stopped over at Chimoyo to attend a dinner given by the officials of the new railway—one of those lurid, brandy-and-water affairs at which women were not expected to be present—while the ladies, with Lord Chalmes in the rôle of protector, had gone on ahead to see the ruins. Aline's impatience to explore a real ruined city had led to that arrangement. The men were to have come up on the next day. Nobody had anticipated any danger—they had been politely assured by all the very polite Portuguese Dons that the war scare was a chimera. It must have seemed horribly unreal to them when, as the ladies were riding out to the greater of the ancient sun-temples on their donkeys, an army of black men gobbled them up, rising out of the ground like the fabled soldiers of the Dragon's Teeth. Lord Chalmes had acted very nobly, it seemed. Witnessing their capture from the camp, he had ridden out and let himself be taken, wishing to protect the women, when he might easily have escaped unseen. But your thoroughbred British "swell," your gilded Life Guardsman, commonly does that sort of thing in just that way—it runs in the blood.

It struck me that the savage he had felled was lying strangely still, and I went up and turned the man over. There was a great purple blotch as large as a teacup round his ear. He was stone cold.

That sudden blow, planted in a vital spot with the

strength that only the red fear of death may arouse, had been almost instantly fatal. The man had died even as he fell, probably from concussion of the brain.

"He's dead," I said wonderingly, turning round to Lord Chalmes. "You've done for him. Look at that purple blotch, man—under his ear."

"Dead, is he?" his lordship's languid voice said without any show of surprise. "I thought he might be, you know, for I meant to kill him."

He began coolly adjusting his monocle.

Norma had slipped from his arms, blushing furiously. She came up to me at once with both hands outstretched—very beautiful and pale; there were dark rings around her eyes. I faced her rather stiffly, recalling that day when she had virtually given me the cut direct; but she appeared to have forgotten it wholly or quietly ignored it, so wonderful are the ways of woman.

She said very low, giving me her hands:

"I owe my life to you again. It was brave of you to come to us in the midst of your own peril. You seem fated to turn up always in time to be my guardian angel, Alan!"

I was in a daze—in a dream! I could scarcely credit the evidence of my senses. That was the first time she had ever called me Alan. The name, rippling from her lips, fell upon my ears like a golden strain of music. And she was holding my hands—pressing them softly! But I knew it wasn't real—

couldn't be real, for of course she was going to marry his lordship—and the music was forbidden music. . . . I had no right to return a liberty that clearly belonged to another; and so, with a very red face, I daresay, I stammered a few words about there having been no risk at all.

"No, no! That is not true! You know it is not!"

I said that I didn't wish to be made a hero of.

Lord Chalmes was drawling, "Once on the docks at Sidney I saw a man killed by that blow, and I remembered it, begad! Capital row up there. We saw it all, you know, and by Gad, sir, Omdurman was a parade-ground to this! Lord, how your machine-guns smashed those beggars up! And you came out to us through all that? . . . You're a cool one, a devilish cool one, Severn."

He stared hard at me and added, "And a rum crew you've got. Ah, look at that, will you!"

He pointed out in the plain. The Arabs were closing in around the remnant of the Impi, scarcely fifty men who had made a last stand upon a little mound covered with green sward.

Suddenly we saw the remorseless white line coil in round them like a great snake, and then we heard the sharp, steady roll of their gunfire begin to sound a broken dead march out of a drifting pall of smoke.

The firing lasted for barely five minutes, and when the smoke had cleared away we saw only a dark heap of corpses where they had stood. After

that grim episode, only a stray shot at intervals told of some wretched survivor being hunted down and killed, for no quarter was given, the wounded being ruthlessly shot. Presently it was all done—the foe was wiped out, and even those red-handed sons of the Prophet had their fill.

Sherry, coming up close to me, whispered, "We must get the women out of this immediately. They can't stay here, you know, and the donkeys are ready." He had found them safely tethered in the *kloof*, and with them the camp dunnage, including Miss Buckerton's precious note-books and her portfolio of sketches. "We must have them up on the hilltop somehow, though they won't like the sights they will see on the way."

So we started at once. It was in truth a sight to mar a soldier's dreams; and the women rode with pale faces and averted eyes, up through those gruesome shambles where the dead lay all knotted and tangled together in bloody heaps, with hideously huddled limbs, and their staring eyes upturned to the placid sky.

CHAPTER XIII

"TREK!"

WE were masters of a stricken field. All around lay dead men in groups and knots —men lying in every conceivable attitude where they had fallen, just as death had overtaken them. Most of them lay riddled with bullets in a long ridge of corpses not ten spears' lengths from the top, and the hillside in front was black with them. Still others lay in tangled heaps on both sides, many of them actually inside of our ring, and several were headless—the work of the fatal claymore. But there were no wounded among them, the Arabs had seen to that. Stark and cold they lay, their sightless eyes staring up into the peaceful sunshine that kissed their dead faces with a sad and awful irony; a terrible monument, I thought, to man's bloody works.

Out of seventy-two men we had lost sixteen, and hardly one of us but would carry some scar to our graves—except the Marquis. By some miracle he had escaped without a scratch, although his sword-arm was stained crimson up to the shoulder, and he did not even appear greatly fatigued. The man

seemed to possess a steel-strung frame. But Ingulf was a sight to see, as he stood leaning on the great broadsword, grimly surveying that fatal field in silence. Both he and his weapon were literally red with gore, and the blood was streaming down him from many *assegai* cuts about the body and limbs, though they were mostly flesh-wounds and would soon dry in the sun. Sherry had two ugly gashes through the thigh and forearm, and Dr. Ivarsson had got a wound in the face. Torres was unhurt, but I would limp for some days to come; and two men were badly wounded, both of them dying within the hour. Every one of our five spearmen, among whom were both of the Bechuanas, had thrown himself into the mêlée and died fighting to the last; they were no match for the Matabele at that game. None of the animals were harmed, but the canvas wagon-top was ripped and gashed in many places by the flying spears.

The Hottentot was dead too; Fate had managed to find him out. And at the back of the open space, an extraordinary spectacle met our eyes. Propped up against a rock with his head sunk slightly forward on his chest, but looking remarkably life-like, and with the short pipe still clenched firmly between his set teeth, sat the ill-fated trooper quite dead. Poor devil! he had smoked his last pipe.

Of the Arabs ten were dead, but they had exacted a red revenge. Most of De Roquemort's following were men who had been slavers in their day; and

whatever their faults may have been, these fellows were dauntless villains. He had equipped them with Martini-Henrys at Beira, and how well they knew to use such weapons, that day's work bore a convincing testimony. To their deadly marksmanship and stout hearts, and to Torres' cool handling of the machine-guns, we owed it that every one of us was not buried beneath those tangled lines of brave men who now lay so still and stared up so unwinkingly at the brilliant face of the sun. That thought came home to me as we stood looking down in silence at our dead foes.

"Look!" De Roquemort said suddenly.

There was horror in his voice, and as he spoke, a swift circling shadow passed across the sun. The next moment there was a sudden rush through the air, and a great bird had settled vampire-like on a corpse lying in the plain below. Far up in the blue, other evil shapes were marshaling. From somewhere close by—it was impossible to say precisely where—echoed and reëchoed a sudden burst of brutish, half human laughter.

"The Guild of the Air and the Earth," Sherry said significantly. "The vultures and hyenas announce their Anniversary Banquet in Matabeleland on the 4th of March. Notable public function, as the *Times* would say; unlimited *éclat* and so forth. . . . Ah, well, we have given them a royal feast——"

He was running on, when the Marquis stayed him with an abrupt gesture.

"They were brave foes . . ." he said in his quiet way.

We understood what he meant; and to me, at least, the remark was a sheer surprise; for it struck me as singular that a man who could go into a life-and-death struggle wearing a sweet smile, and come out of it with a sweeter smile than he wore when he went in—a man who smiled so blandly while he drove his steel remorselessly through human hearts —had shamed us with his fine and thorough chivalry toward a fallen foe. It was a trick of the man's high birth and perfect courage that one resented even while one admired it in despair.

In truth, I was beginning to respect that man, for all Rhodes' dark hints of his questionable past and the double game he seemingly played. And if it came to that, how should the pot call the kettle black? But it was high time to think of burying our dead and getting out of the locality before some other war-party, of which there were doubtless more than one afield, came up and added our corpses to the already sufficiently gruesome collection of the slain. The presence of so many dead would be sure to provoke inquiry in more than one quarter, and we had our own reasons for not caring to court publicity. And for me there was also the possibility that I might be pressed into the Chartered Com-

pany's service until this war was ended, for I carried a captain's commission in the Rhodesian army; while that resourceful Frenchman went on indomitably alone to pull King Leopold's chestnuts out of the fire. And I knew how dear this project was to the heart of Cecil Rhodes; how he would publicly ignore but secretly condemn, and how his great soul would chafe when the Belgian's sordid Protectorate triumphed, and Leopold the Unready became the master of Central Africa. Those dead savages became a menace that neither of us could afford to leave.

Our own dead we buried first in one long and shallow grave which we dug on top of the hill, and we piled up a flat cairn of stones to keep the jackals away. The Marquis' ready wit had veiled these rather ghastly details from the unaccustomed eyes of the women with an extemporized screen of heavy canvas which insured them enough privacy to put themselves to rights. But they must have guessed what was going on from the obvious sounds of the grave-digging. Then we set to work to get rid of our late foes by way of the river. We knew the swift current would carry the bodies down to the great quicksands of the marsh below; they would vanish beneath the shifting sands, and no man's search would ever resurrect them. What few stopped by the way, the crocodiles would devour, and so by a bitter irony, their tribal name of *Matabele,*

which in plain English means "The Disappearers," would be brought to fulfilment.

All their weapons we gathered up and threw in a deep pool, save one or two which we kept as mementoes of the fight. And so, in a day or two there would be nothing left to mark the fray but a nameless cairn and a few whitening bones in the plain. On the hilltop, under an awning to shelter them from the sun, the wounded men had been placed under the merciful care of the women; but Lord Chalmes, who had quietly offered his services, worked like any Kaffir with the rest of us in getting rid of the dead. If he wondered why we were wasting precious time in clearing a field so soon to be abandoned, he made no comment, doing his share of the work manfully and with a physical strength that drew from the Arabs guttural words of surprise as they looked at his lean frame.

I saw him singlehanded heave up the body of a tall dead warrior—which I recognized as the corpse of the soldier who had done for poor Mustapha in the last charge—and hurl him over the cliff-side to the swift waters below, where he fell with a mighty splash and vanished. Presently he bobbed up again a long way farther down on his way to his final resting place in the quicksands.

It was a strange, wild task, as we toiled for more than two hours like Titans in a tropic sun; and both of the wounded men died before it was finished, and

were buried alongside of their comrades. When it was over at last, we had breakfast—an unbelievable breakfast of tea and potted tongue and Cooke's biscuit, and afterward actually a bumper of mellow champagne, of which his lordship had boasted a rather dazzling supply. We had found three of the cases in the *kloof*. The Matabele had been carrying them along for two days, meaning them for the chiefs whose price for joining the war was to have been the white women; the native idea of a *quid pro quo*.

The Arabs, grouped apart, ate wolfishly with their fingers, washing down their repast with rum and water in tin cups. One saw that the Koran did not at all trouble them. They were a lot of great villains—*lazzarones*, the scourings of the Mozambique coast; there were scarcely a dozen praying-rugs among them. But no braver band of scoundrels existed, and they had all that strange loyalty of the desert's children for those with whom they have eaten salt; even for "the little Giaour," as behind his back they dubbed Raoul de Roquemort, their master.

The Giaour himself, below his iron coolness, was in the very deuce of a quandary for once, though the ladies never guessed it as he politely bowed them to their quarters with a gallant air of easy unconcern and a careless word aside as to riding-clothes. But as soon as they were out of earshot he turned on us in chagrin that he could not conceal.

"*Mon Dieu,* gentlemen, what folly! Grand ladies—and a trip to the devil knows where. It is unhappy, but what would you have? I am pledged to an affair . . . any fool sees that. *Morbleu!* one does not carry machine-guns for a holiday!"

He nodded ironically to Lord Chalmes.

"No, not for the Lilies of France, Monsieur. I can read what is in your mind; you are wrong," and he laughed a little.

Suddenly he grew very grave.

"So you see, my lord," he said, "I cannot give you an escort; I cannot play false to the Power behind. . . . Look you, fifty men would be too few. And where would you go if you had them? Buluwayo is surrounded, the whole country is in a state of war. You would be mad to tempt fate again, Monsieur. A watcher in one of those villages on the cliffs could bring an Impi down on you before you had gone two days' march; and then—well, this part of Africa is no place for a white woman now, my lord."

Lord Chalmes said after a little silence, "You mean that we are cut off from the coast?"

"Exactly that, Monsieur."

"But we cannot go west into the desert, you know, nor south in the wake of those beggars!"

"Aye," I broke in impatiently, "and we cannot stay here and take root! We must get out of this. Let us strike out for the Zambesi."

So for a precious half hour while the sun mounted

higher in the sky and the vultures wheeled to and fro above the quicksand, we remained irresolute, and it was Chalmes who settled the matter at last by saying in his cool drawl:

"We must make for the Zambesi and try to get on to Quilimane, you know. Come, gentlemen—trek."

"*Trek!*"

Something strangely potent in that word, seized and hungrily tossed along by voices in many keys, stirred the camp like the breath of the north wind. They knew it well, those dark brothers-in-arms; brethren of many a slave march of other days; and as though by magic, it awoke the camp to action. The Maxims were unlimbered swiftly and loaded upon the donkeys, and presently the long line of men swung out across the plain with the ox-wagon bringing up the rear; while the ladies, very fetching figures in khaki and gaiters, the last London cry for the tropics and the shooting-season, rode well in the van by the Giaour's order. Mrs. Rountree, with all her forty seasons resting lightly on her fragile shoulders, looked like a slip of a girl in her short riding-skirt and wide hat; she had quite recovered from her terrible shock of the morning. The American girl, her niece, had in the saddle the superb swing of a cavalryman. She rode with keen interest in her surroundings, a ready bow to the inevitable; while, in the earthly heaven of a lover's paradise, Sherry kept pace with her on a wiry Basutu pony—and the boy

was stiff with wounds! But he had found his romance again, so strangely here in a splendid world of deeds that he, too, had borne a share in better than he had ever dreamed. So what did wounds matter to that? But I had lost mine, I saw, with a bitter smile and a dull catch in my throat; for, riding just ahead of them, Lord Chalmes—was it by accident—was paired off again with Norma; and so Mrs. Rountree fell to me. I found in that fragile woman an unexpected quality of brave endurance. She bore up wonderfully, even after we had forded the river at midday and pushed on steadily without a halt till nightfall. We went on again an hour after moonrise, making a forced march for safety's sake through all the long night, but no complaint ever passed her lips. Even now, when I think of that weary night march, I wonder at that frail lady's fortitude.

The gray light of the dawn was breaking in the east when we halted at last, and presently the sun came up over a wild waste of rocks edging the desert and revealed the welcome sight of a green patch of velvet sward growing where a crystal spring gushed and overflowed at the base of a sheer line of basalt crags that ended in one tremendous mountain spur. Swiftly the word to halt went round, but quicker than it could travel, Raoul de Roquemort, bowing low in his gallant courtier fashion, was at Mrs. Rountree's stirrup, helping her to dismount, with a new light of admiration in his eyes.

"Ah, Madame," he said, "you have shown us a lesson in fortitude that is difficult to forget!"

She answered him only with a brave smile, but as she attempted to stand alone a quiver of imminent collapse ran through her shapely figure, and I thought she would have fallen at his feet; but his strong arm was instantly passed around her waist with the prompt decision of a man who knew his articles of war, where women were concerned—especially pretty widows; and so for a few moments more he stood supporting her. I walked away with a low whistle of astonishment. Here was another romance in the making.

For the next three weeks we pushed on to the Zambesi. We had been obliged to leave the wagon and oxen behind with a friendly chief in the Manica country, taking only the spare mounts and the donkeys with the Maxims. It was almost a gift outright, as we should probably never return to claim them; but they must have been abandoned in any case sooner or later, for we had entered the belt of country haunted by the *tsetse* fly, that amazing insect whose fatal secret forms not the least of Africa's grim enigmas.

Then at last one day the great river lay stretched below us, its yellow tide flowing forever to the sea between marshy shores where hippopotami sported in the reeds, past reeking mud-banks where the

crocodiles lay in sinister relays waiting sleeplessly for prey with their hideous dull eyes always wide open in the blighting sun-glare. Far away eastward, miles downstream, the shores receded into nameless lagoons—the "backwash" of the Zambesi—fringed with the magnificent, treacherous lush vegetation of a great African river, and alive with the booming of wildfowl.

Lord Chalmes pointed to the farther shore.

"Look there," he cried, "a *dhow* moored to the bank! If gold will buy that craft and her masters, the thing is easy. We can go down river in her to the coast, you know, to Quilimane."

The Marquis spun round with his ironical smile, and said in a tone full of meaning:

"Do you think so, my lord? Harkee, I do not agree with you there. You forget that Quilimane is six hundred miles from here by river, and the darker fact that the slave trade still flourishes here, for all your British men-of-war. Remember your cargo—*camarade*—white ivory. . . . Not pleasant to think of, eh, Monsieur?"

His lordship's face fell at this.

"But you could give us a guard," he cried.

"To be sent to Paradise! Come, Monsieur, must you be convinced?"

He beckoned to the leader of the Arabs, a powerfully built old man of fifty named El Zanek, with something sinister in the fixed stare of a pair of extraordinary eyes set too far apart in his yellow

face, like a falcon's, and a great livid blue scar—an ancient sabre-cut—running the whole length of his left cheek and jaw. He had been Tippoo Tib's left-hand man in the old days, and was himself one of the greatest rascals in Africa on his own account, although, strange as it seems, he had the Arab's loyalty to his salt.

De Roquemort, pointing to the *dhow,* held brief conversation with this man in the Swahili tongue, and an odd silence fell.

It was broken at last by El Zanek.

"For the fidelity of those here I can answer," he said meaningly. "Are we not as brothers? . . . But for those whom they would meet—who can tell? There are many *dhows* of the slavers that ply the great river, and the English gunboats at the rivermouth are careless now. The secret slave-marts of the Great on Earth would bid a king's ransom for the white *houris,* and the gold of Stamboul reaches across the world. . . . *Kismet! Kismet!* Allah is great, and these things are appointed!"

Lord Chalmes, listening with a crestfallen face, swore audibly.

"Right-O!" said he. "Begad, you know, it wouldn't do—the cursed yellow devils! I'll have a famous wigging for my lords of the Admiralty over this. But what is to be done?"

"Nothing," De Roquemort said blandly. "You must wait, and trust to fortune. We can beat off any force of natives, and the honor of these ladies is

safe with us, though I grant it seems a little hard on them."

He laughed, and out came his inexhaustible cigarette-case.

"That, Monsieur, is not without its compensations for us. But I give you a gentleman's word that when this business is done with, I shall myself escort them safely to the coast. Will you have a cigarette?"

Chalmes suddenly said point-blank:

"Will you tell me where we are bound for?"

"That is my little affair, Monsieur."

"Curse your little affair!" my lord flashed out to that. Then he wheeled sharply on me.

"And you," he said, "with your air of secrecy—you with your picked-up gentleman's veneer, and God knows what you have up your sleeve—may I ask where the devil you are bound to?"

I felt the blood mounting to my temples, but I only laughed exasperatingly in his face.

"Wait and see, my lord!"

He gave me a probing stare, then without a word walked moodily away to seek enlightenment of Dr. Eric Ivarsson. He got little out of him, at all events, for the old archeologist, launched on his pet topic of the sea-king's Saga, prattled away madly, to his lordship's sheer amazement.

Then we hailed the *dhow,* which ran up her lateen sail by way of answer and crept across the river. She was a big raking craft manned by half a dozen

evil-faced Arabs led by a tall man with one arm. He stood upon her poop and shouted orders to the steersman in bastard Arabic. He handled her ably enough against the current, landing a matter of fifty yards below us. El Zanek swaggered down with us; it developed that the two were old companions in crime—they had run cargoes of "black ivory" together when the slave traffic was in its palmy days. And the *dhow's* presence would save us the trouble of fording the river.

The tall man proffered his *chibouk,* and they began haggling in the Arab fashion. It was beautiful; they were past masters of the art. The *dhow's* captain had a shade the better of it. He was a superb liar. He, "Captain Hafid," was an honest trader in ivory, and the master of a sea-going craft—Allah forbid that he be ferryman to the unbelievers! No, by the beard of the Prophet, it was useless to ask! El Zanek raised the price craftily by inches. Finally it was settled; De Roquemort's money-belt shed gold pieces till Hafid came around to our way of thinking, and in a little while the air was full of curses as the unwilling donkeys were driven up the *dhow's* gangplank.

By three o'clock we were over, with the Maxim guns and donkeys, and the *dhow* had made two trips. As the old line of march was formed, I saw Lord Chalmes' jaw set hard under his tawny mustache; and once more we turned our faces to the fateful and enigmatic north. He was very plainly

puzzled, though he would not let it show in his face.

Hafid, from the *dhow's* gunwale, threw a long stare hungrily ashore at the women, and for an instant his features worked convulsively in the swift transition of a man suddenly off his guard. I knew that for them he would have murdered us all without a qualm of remorse. But we were too strong for him, and he knew that. He remained standing there motionless and sinister, in that attitude, with that blaze of unutterable, primal passions stamped on his evil face, for another half minute. Then when I looked again, he was gone.

Riding alone behind the Maxims' convoy, I glanced back later to find Lord Chalmes unaccountably missing from his place in the line of march; but at length, I caught a glimpse of his white pith sunhelmet bobbing back in the rear. He was doggedly keeping to his task of cultivating the company of Dr. Eric Ivarsson, that babbler on the long-dead past. What had he learned? And after all, what did it matter? Then from behind me, I was electrified by the sound of a voice whose indefinite sweetness still held for me its never failing thrill.

She—of course it was Norma—came up to me at a smart canter, and pulled up alongside. She had been using her spur. Then, quite unabashed, she said with a slow smile:

"Would it flatter you, Mr. Severn, to learn that you have been missed? Really, of late I have al-

most grown to think that you have shunned me. May I inquire why?"

"His lordship is an indefatigable watch-dog," I said with a candid touch of bitterness. "He is always in his box."

She laughed. "Then I am glad that he has forsaken it for once, for I wish to ask you a question. Is it true that we are going with you to the Equator?"

"I suppose so," I said, nonplussed.

"And in fact a little farther?"

"Er—well, yes," I admitted to that. Then I pulled myself up with a jerk. "I cannot tell you where we are bound," I said. "Believe me, I regret that fate has blindly made our road yours—for it is a road of peril. But it is necessary for your own safety."

"Yes," she assented quickly, "I know all that. It's very chivalrous of you to burden yourselves with us—rather fine." She looked at me with introspective eyes. "And I know, too, that you dined with a very famous gentleman before you ever started."

I said maliciously, "I was not aware that my humble doings were of interest to any one—much less yourself!"

For the first time, then, she colored up suddenly like a schoolgirl. But in her next words, with a woman's cleverness, she was explaining it all away in a perfectly natural, matter-of-fact voice.

"Don't misunderstand me, pray. You were seen

with the Premier himself; such things always go the rounds, you see. I suppose it is another of Mr. Rhodes' empire-building schemes? You need not trouble to deny it, sir! But the other, this bland gentleman with his Maxims and his pirate crew—what part does *he* play in the plot?"

"He never told me," I replied, "and the curtain has not fallen yet."

"Then I will tell you now—the emissary of the Other Power. But *what* Power, Mr. Severn?"

"You must ask him that," I suggested, smiling.

"And so I shall," she answered quietly, "one day."

"Do!" said I. "He's extremely communicative!"

We laughed together this time; once more, for the fleeting moment of the present, we stood on the old footing of the oddly intimate past.

"Like yourself?" she smiled back at me then. "Well, we won't quarrel over what Power. At least it is some Power wise enough to choose for its emissary a brave man, Mr. Severn. Oh, I am positively smitten with him; he's the politest villain I have ever met off-stage! And you? Really, I trust you've considerable discretion mingled with your valor? So the plot will be interesting—diamond cut diamond! I sincerely wish you very well, Mr. Severn. And—I'm backing you against the other Power!"

There was a vital undercurrent below her words

that thrilled me; the invincible creed of race. Only a woman's marvelous confidence in the idols she has reared up! Often they are clay-footed idols; but the blessed confidence, the unstaggered hope, is always there!

I bent over suddenly in the saddle, looking straight into her eyes.

"And if I win?" I said tensely. "You——"

"And if you win?" she repeated very low. "I —ah, no! How can you ask *that* of me—now? I cannot say what you would wish me to! But win—if you can!"

"Win what, my masters?" a mocking voice inquired, and I recognized Miss Buckerton's unique drawl. She had descended upon us in her unceremonious way, dragging Sherry in her wake. So the grim little gods of lost opportunities stepped in again and the elusive moment passed.

"What are you two conspirators plotting?" she cried, amused. "And what game's to win?"

"Why, the game of love!" I flung back gallantly, with a quick change to a gay bantering tone. "Isn't that the only game worth winning? And we were plotting, I think, a grand Sweepstakes to include yourself."

She gave me a singular look, and laughed.

"That is an apt answer, Mr. Severn," she said. "At least the wilderness has not dulled your wits. But leave me out of your Sweepstakes until we get back to civilization. Wedding bells do not ring well

in a jungle. And yet all this is glorious—gorgeous! I'm perfectly content with it. It's wonderful! This impossible life, these impossible people . . . all under the same old sun! And it'll all come out in brevier—I've yards of notes. Dr. Eric Ivarsson has opened a perfect mine of mystery. 'We will follow the sea-king's Saga. . . .' He says: 'Across the Equator we shall find it—*so!*' Ruins, he insists, that are like no other ruins this land ever saw. Sometimes he seems to think the ruins won't be so ruined. As for me, I am a Simon-pure adventurer, and I say: 'Lead on Macduff! On to the Unknown!'"

On to the Unknown! Poor child! Could she have realized the immensity of the journey before her, a journey of more than a thousand miles, and foreseen its hundred perils—had she but glimpsed its gaunt specters of hunger, of thirst, its nameless fears, and the nerve-shattering, haunting sense of isolation from the comfortable outer world, that monstrous gulf of separation, like the unbridgeable chasms that appear in dreams, she might have whistled a different tune!

For it is that way with African travel, as with polar exploration. A party of venturesome people strikes boldly inland from the coast, and presently the great black heart of the continent opens and swallows them and they disappear. Weeks, months, years elapse before they finally emerge—if they ever do—to the view of the outside world.

Then some fine morning, over your coffee, you pick up your crumpled copy of the London *Times* or the New York *Herald,* and wonderingly read that Captain Polestar, the noted Antarctic explorer, or Dr. Anthrax, the famous discoverer of Mt. Inaccessible, has "Come Back From The Dead"—or words to that effect. And of course you join in the general thanksgiving. For the point is that too often they never do emerge.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MOUNTAIN OF THE SKULL

SEMI-DARKNESS—darkness deep as twilight in northern latitudes—brooded over the great equatorial forest. Once fairly within its profound shades, it was literally impossible to see the sun. It was as though a tremendous pall had been let down from above. There were depths where one saw only such light as a diver sees ten fathoms below the surface of the sea. And there was an insecurity, a sense of abominable profundity, that struck into man's natural cheerfulness like a poisoned knife, and laid the bond of its mysterious silence across men's lips. One seemed momentarily waiting to hear the crashing strains of the "*Dies Irae*" come thundering out all at once. Yet the place was utterly still, without sound or motion.

Nobody attempted to talk at all, except when it was unavoidable. The seal of silence was inexorable in that place. It suited the taciturn humor of the Arabs well enough; they were little given to conversation anywhere. But we had to hack a way every few yards for the donkeys with the Maxims; and the crashing of our sabers on the dense tropic

growth proved at least that we were men and not a procession of specters, for which the Arabs, in their ghostly long white *burnooses,* might have passed as they flitted through those silent, fever-haunted glades, wordless and grim, in the dim light, with the fear of Allah written on their dark faces.

There were other more material horrors, too.

Before we had been a week in the forest, two men had sickened and died of fever brought on by the nameless reek of things decayed and rotten, working in scarcely healed wounds. Four days afterward, another man died suddenly of the wasting sickness caused by eating the semi-poisonous manioc root in its crude state. Poor wretch, he had only supplemented his all too meager rations in private; provisions were running perilously low. There was no game to speak of in the forest, and we had beheld no human dwellers for weeks. Its desolation was appalling. It was like a country that had never had an inhabitant. For all one knew, that vast, sunless waste might stretch to the fabled *Lunæ Montes,* or "Mountains of the Moon" of the ancients, or on to the distant highlands of Abyssinia, far away to the north.

On the 29th of June, we had crossed the Equator, but found no break in the great forest. According to Dr. Ivarsson's aneroid, we were more than 6,000 feet above sea-level, and steadily ascending. Up to now we had been guided by Ibrahim's map, but in our extraordinary position, no map or chart made

by man was of much avail, since it was impossible to go around a barrier which stretched east and west, right across the continent in a solid belt four hundred miles wide. It is quite true that explorers have managed to pierce that gigantic natural barrier in a desultory fashion, but only once in a great while, at places hundreds of miles apart; and the empty look upon the maps of Central Africa still tells of enigmas unguessed—of riddles never read. Yet we must face it and penetrate its secret or turn back.

To make matters worse, we were short of quinine. We went on indomitably, fighting off fever at every step, and no jarring twinge of conscience obtruded itself in my thoughts concerning the propriety of making common cause with the emissary of the other flag. By tacit consent we hung together; I had actually grown to have a liking for the man and to regret that he was my unconscious adversary in that left-handed game.

And I believed he was in the dark as to me.

The days had passed in apparently endless marches; and the ladies, mounted on their sturdy, sure-footed donkeys that never seemed to tire, bore that journey pluckily, while Eric Ivarsson was their mainstay in foul weather. That grotesque old savant, strangely enough, was forever at their beck and call. With his gargoyle's face and faded, parchment skin, his shrewd little gray eyes peering dimly through enormous steel-framed glasses, he seemed like Father Time himself beside their youthful faces,

that of late were growing a little pale and haggard.

And, day after day, I had watched the waning bloom upon their cheeks fading insensibly but surely —had marked the slow, significant deepening of those haggard little circles, like the pallid shadows of sorrow that fall from some master painter's brush; the vague reflections of his darker moods, that haunt so many a priceless, pictured face. And, like the dark touch of genius upon the canvas, those shadowy lines only intensified their beauty and made it more ethereal. But their irony was not lost on me. For unless we reached the edge of the great forest very soon, the end was very certain; we should leave our bones to rot in some reeking Central African swamp. Short rations and hard marching were telling terribly on us all by now.

And I, cursing fate impotently, turned my eyes away from the sight of those wonderful, serene, white faces—those haunting faces, which the huge, unreasoning maw of the ravening wilderness was perhaps inevitably to swallow and annihilate forever, after all. For I knew that starvation and fever grinned at them openly now—though they had never guessed.

For it had come to that. We had food for only four days more, and but two ounces of quinine. And then, like a thief in the night, came the sleeping-sickness—that pale specter of the tropics—and men began to die off suddenly like flies.

What was it? Other men have asked that ques-

tion—men with cool brains—seeing their bearers droop and die mysteriously under its deadly breath. For, oddly enough, it almost never takes a European; perhaps it is the racial difference in temperament between the black man and the white; but as the proverb runs, "Egypt to the Egyptians," fate to the fatalist, who can tell?

Only another grim riddle of the Dark Continent, we hear people say! Yet to think that brave men should sleep unwakened at the gates of death, to see the stamp of unutterable weariness so strangely graven on their hopeless faces! . . . That is the pity of it, that incomprehensible torpor, that hideous surrender. And that was what we saw, hour by hour, till our brains reeled with horror, and more than a fifth of our number had gone to swell the long list of victims of that equatorial hell. Man after man, they dropped in that deathly sleep, and we were powerless to save them. But we went on somehow. Over us the long, quiet shadows of twilight drooped continually, and it seemed as though we should never emerge again to the welcome light of day, into the perfect sunshine that men never learn to value at its true worth, it seems, until it has been cut off.

In the most desperate situations there is always hope. That is a lesson which Man has never quite unlearned. About four o'clock—it was the fourth day and our food was nearly gone—Lord Chalmes, who chanced to be ahead, stumbled into a patch of

ripening plantains. There were faint traces of a clearing which the rank, choking growth of the tropics had nearly obliterated. There were no bones and no remains of huts. Whoever the people were that had once cultivated the clearing, they had long since gone away. But the plantains had gone on multiplying in accord with Nature's bountiful law, until now there were literally thousands of them, nearly ripe.

And, as though by an actual miracle, we were saved. The discovery had put new hope into our hearts, for we knew we could not be far off the edge of the forest now. It was obvious enough that no natives would go very far in for a purpose so simple. The wholesome food had magically banished the epidemic of sickness that had stricken the men, and after a few hours' rest we went on with renewed strength.

On the sixth day, at nine o'clock, one of the Arabs in front called out that he could see a great light ahead of him. A cheer went up from all those bronzed throats, and then, pell mell, men falling over one another in their eagerness, we rushed forward and found that we had reached the end of the great barrier.

There in a sky without a cloud, the sun was shining placidly on a scene that made our hearts beat faster as we gazed. Wave on wave of rolling uplands covered with long yellow *tambouki* grass, like a sea of ripening grain, and in the distance the broad

expanse of a beautiful blue lake, like a magnificent gem in a setting of green rocky hills. Far away to the north, fifty miles or more, the morning sun rays kissed the tall, glittering white crests of a mighty mountain range, whose snow-capped peaks towered into the blue.

A voice said suddenly behind me:

"Across those mountains, my friend, we shall find each what our hearts desire! For me the other half of the Saga; for you—what? Hardly the land of milk and honey you expect to find—you and my good friend Rhodes; but a land of old secrets, of ruins, of dead gods. . . . Aye, the sea-kings are there, I tell you; there is the eyrie they would seek, and the Norse records do not tell lies."

I turned around to the old archeologist, who was standing there with the rapt look of some Norse *skald* on his cracked and wrinkled face, his long iron-gray locks flying in the breeze.

"You are mad," I said. "Quite mad! There are no Vikings there. You've come to the wrong show. The old fellow had a bad nightmare, you know. The whole business is a chimera."

For answer he pointed significantly at Ingulf, who stood gazing fixedly at the far off mountains, his lips half parted, and a queer stare on his inscrutable face.

"Look at that man," he droned. "Tell me—if you can—who is he; where did he come from? Look at his eyes! . . . So! a man might hazard a

guess that it is not the first time he has seen those mountains. I tell you he knows something if he would speak out."

Lord Chalmes sauntered up to us, lazily wiping his monocle.

"Ripping set of scenery," he observed. "Gad, sir, it is like heaven after purgatory. Miss Buckerton has just issued another ultimatum. We've concluded, you know, to see this thing through with you chaps, and I daresay I'm not sorry. I fancy I may have turned a bit crusty once or twice," he was good enough to add. He nodded to Dr. Ivarsson with an amused grin. "So you think you shall find your lost sea-kings behind those mountains, Doctor?"

The other wagged his great head vigorously. "Aye," he said, "we shall find them, young sir, so surely as the first white man to set his foot on the North American continent was a Norseman!"

I left the Doctor gesticulating like a hypnotist in his lordship's amused, incredulous face, and went to have a look at the donkeys. None of them had come to any harm in the forest, except from the aloe thorns, and in half an hour we were on the march again, steering for the snow-capped mountain range. In that marvelously clear atmosphere, it seemed no more than a day's march away; but it was three days before we had reached the base of the mountains and started to ascend them, picking our route through a terrifically narrow mountain pass which appeared to

wind its tortuous way slowly upward to the snow-line. At times we had to dismount and lead our beasts, where the pass dwindled to a mere footpath running along the verge of an awful chasm which had in places a sheer drop of fifteen hundred feet. And often there was barely room for one of the donkeys with the Maxims to squeeze by. Once I thought they would go over the brink with the guns. But they never did. It was the most terrifying abyss that any of us had ever seen—like the pit of Hell itself in some dream of the painter Doré. And, looking down those frightful perpendicular walls, I felt my brain positively reel. They conveyed subtly a horrible invitation, had an extraordinary drawing-power, like shadowy hands down there that beckoned, beckoned. . . . And below us, over those black depths, a solitary bird of prey hung motionless, poised on powerful wings.

At five o'clock we reached the snow-line, having begun the ascent of the pass at dawn. That night the Arabs suffered keenly from the cold, and the water froze to ice in our canteens. The ladies passed the long hours at least endurably in their tent, in which a petrol stove was kept burning; while De Roquemort—a wise, quiet, capable, clever De Roquemort in this sort of emergency—had draped the outside with skins that broke the chill of the wind. To any party less well equipped, a night passed at that altitude would have meant being

frozen stiff. But we had had the foresight to halt at a small clump of dwarfed firs, which grew, as though by a providential whim of fate, out of the ragged flank of the mountain, and a roaring fire was kept going. They were the very last sentinels of vegetable life. Everywhere else, above us, and in front, the mountain was naked save for the lava ashes and the snow. We were bivouacking on a chain of extinct volcanoes.

The Arabs, huddled together by the fire for warmth, snatched a few hours of broken sleep. At length we joined them, throwing ourselves down on the hard ground, close to the animals; for men will sleep even in the strangest and most disquieting surroundings.

Somehow at last the night wore away; another dawn came gliding over the crest of the lofty range, and presently the snow-clad peaks above us were glowing as though lit up by the glare of a burning city. Like a rampart reared by supernatural hands to hide a formidable secret from the prying gaze of that puny insect, man, the great range ran on unbroken into the northeast, apparently in a mighty circle, farther than the eye could reach, frowning in silent grandeur over the rest of the landscape for league on league, and capped with the eternal snows. We began at once to descend the pass. After some hours of very rough going over jagged, crumbling lava-beds, it swung out around the eastern flank of the mountain, which had totally cut off the

view to the north. Then it wound down the mountainside in a series of sharp zigzags, like the trail of a colossal snake upon a hillside.

We halted to look, and I saw Dr. Ivarsson abruptly unsling a battered pair of binoculars. I rubbed my eyes. There was something queer with the landscape; it was all out of joint. The Arabs, jabbering away like anything, pointed out to the desert. Cold fear was written on their faces. But Eric Ivarsson, who had hastily unslung his binoculars, never raised them to his eyes.

Lord Chalmes, at my elbow, kept saying in a curious, rapid, tense mutter—"Well, I'm demmed! . . . Well, I'm demmed! . . ."

I stared and stared. Down there in the middle of the arid desert, which stretched away to the north for fifty or sixty miles from the foot of the mountains, was set a great mass of fantastic architecture—the glittering spires and towers of a large walled city, rising white and tall out of a blazing veil of yellow vapor. And then, before you could wink twice, that ghostly city had faded and disappeared. Where it had been, there was only the wild expanse of sun-bleached desert.

Dr. Ivarsson let out a startling, hollow cackle.

"You saw it too, then?" he mumbled.

"Aye—the mirage, you mean?"

"The city of lost men, or its atmospheric projection; its aura—whatever you like! So, young friend, that place exists, and perhaps we may see

it one day. Mark me, the mirage does not send its illusion across mountains."

He cackled triumphantly, and then suddenly froze up with a gasp. His eyes were riveted on Ingulf, who stood shaking like a leaf in the wind, his fingers convulsively closed on the hilt of the dead swashbuckler's formidable weapon, which he had half drawn—staring, staring at the empty desert, but with such a look of cold fury and hatred and fear on his distorted features as I had never seen stamped on any man's face.

It gave me the cold shivers. That ghostly illusion, that unreal city of the lost, had stirred him to unsuspected depths. Had the past come back? Had he seen something exactly like that before?

Nobody but the Doctor had noticed the remarkable effect which the mirage had produced on Ingulf. We descended to the plain and struck out across the desert, having filled our water-skins at a running stream that flowed from the eastern side of the mountains. A great spur ran out to the east from the parent range in the shape of a gigantic scythe, ending in three tall peaks.

By the end of the second day, we were close enough to make out that the tallest peak was apparently a volcano in much the same stage of suspended activity as Vesuvius has been for centuries. At times we could see with the aid of the Doctor's binoculars a very faint, very tall column of blue smoke hanging above the summit; but there were

times when it was not discernible. By noon of the next day the country began to grow more fertile; we had reached the end of the desert. And it was time—barely a pint of water remained apiece. One of the Arabs had actually contrived on the first day to stalk an ostrich, lying flat on his stomach and wriggling like a human snake, half a mile through the sand with the marvelous patience of the indomitable children of the East. Afterward, arrayed in the dead bird's skin, he had bagged three more, walking up boldly in gunshot. And, in a hollow scooped in the sand, we had found a dozen giant eggs, perfectly fresh. They had helped to solve the problem of food.

So we had not suffered any heroic privations in the desert; and the eternal heritage of hope, so strong in every human breast, welled up buoyantly again as we made out, not more than five or six miles off, the broad silver ribbon of a river winding away from the great mountain spur.

The ladies all uttered delighted exclamations.

"A river!" Alline cried in rapture. "A real river! Dear me, what a luxury it would be to bathe!"

"Rather a risky luxury," Chalmes said dryly. "The crocodiles, you know——"

He paused apologetically.

De Roquemort, smiling across at Mrs. Rountree with the detached air of a very perfect understanding, politely put at their disposal the newest *cri* in

portable canvas baths, of which, in addition to his other amazing effects, he had brought two from France. The man was a long succession of surprises. He was always admirable. He fought a battle for you or did you an inestimable service with the same gay air of *noblesse oblige*. His offer of a portable bathtub to a lady who was marooned by the vagaries of fate on the great plateau of East Central Africa, never staggered me. Had she expressed a desire to fly, I never doubted he would have conjured up an airship. I was beginning to know him very well.

"Bathtubs, Mademoiselle," he added with a touch of raillery, "are like wine-bottles—too often empty! Permit me to make my little epigram. *Enfin*—never bathe till you come to the water!"

"Oh, the river's warranted real," I said.

"By Ibrahim . . ." he said significantly. "It is marked here on the poor devil's map."

By sunset we were camped on its grassy shore, which was like Arcadia, after the desert. Wildfowl called in the reeds, and all around was the teeming life of wild things. Only man was missing from the scheme. We lolled, smoking, on the velvet sward. The sinking sun threw an enormous crimson glare on the scarred face of the mountain opposite—now not more than four or five miles off—lighting it up in red relief against the sky. And suddenly we became aware of something diabolic about that mountain.

Every one stared. Good God! there was a great face glaring at us—a dim, colossal, devilish face. It was like a countenance dead and desecrated, of which the principal characteristic was very obviously evil. . . . Evil, but not the evil that men associate with peril; rather was it the evil of an ancient threat, of an immortal menace, of a monstrous calamity hung up there, ten thousand feet in mid-air! As I looked, it sent a cold shiver straight through me. De Roquemort sprang to his feet from the sward where he had been lolling, and pointed at the mountain, with a biting Gascon oath like the rasp of a file on steel.

"Death of my blood!" he said, "it is the 'Mountain of the Skull!' Ibrahim told the truth, after all!"

PART FOURTH

LAND O' LOST VIKINGS

CHAPTER XV

THROUGH THE CRATER'S WALL

I WAS quite speechless, and rather sharply shaken. Ibrahim *had* told the truth; it *was* the "Mountain of the Skull." At least, by some colossal freak of Nature, the configuration of its western face had an astonishingly realistic resemblance to a monstrous skull, when seen from a matter of five miles or so; you lost the *vraisemblance* any closer. The thing utterly staggered the imagination, until you came to understand that it was, of course, merely a fantastic freak of resistless volcanic forces working on a huge scale.

Two-thirds of the way to the summit, there were two immense holes in the crater's wall, roughly circular and nearly a thousand feet apart—a Titan might have drilled them with the pyramid of Cheops for a tool, and the Eiffel Tower could have been thrown bodily into either one of them. Quite a thousand feet below them yawned a frightful triangular chasm which seemed to pierce the very entrails of the mountain, and perfectly suggested the nasal cavity of a skull. Below that, there was a great cleft hundreds of feet broad, but not very deep,

filled up by the flow of molten lava from beneath. Molten lava had drilled the enormous eyeholes and blown out the cavity of the nose; and molten lava had added a final touch of realism by guttering, as it dried, in rows of giant, blackish-yellow teeth, across that huge and shallow *crevasse,* of which the edges writhed back dreadfully in a dim, Satanic grin.

The crater itself seemed cut off short at the top. It was flat-rimmed like a vast punch-bowl, and, the sides being capped with snow, had exactly the appearance of a huge hairless pate. And in point of fact, the whole conception could not have been more abominably realistic had it been hewn, in large, at the nod of some great King, to a chorus of groans, the echo of an old-world lash, or chain-ganged red-handed by all the sculptors of a thousand years!

Even the Arabs, quite unnerved, those wild retainers who feared nothing alive, gazed speechlessly at that uncanny sight, till suddenly from among them rose a voice of panic:

"Look, look at the mountain! *Shaitan!* . . . 'Tis the Evil One . . . Fly! Fly!"

They would have bolted outright, but they were fatalists. *Kismet!* Allah was great, and what was written was written, in spite of any human line of action. The owner of the panic-stricken voice did bolt, for a hundred yards or more, back toward the desert, where he fell down in a dead swoon, and had to be revived afterward with rum. But he was a

cross-bred Swahili, the son of an epileptic mother. The others stood their ground, mumbling shaken prayers.

Dr. Ivarsson, quite unstaggered, was staring at the phenomenon through battered binoculars.

"Ha, young friend! Who is right now?" he burst out, with his racking, hollow cackle, and I had to confess that his Sagas were unpleasantly veracious. Then, suddenly, the blood-red glare died out on the face of the mountain, and the sun went down with the weird abruptness of the tropics, as though its setting had been an act of astounding legerdemain.

The devilish skull-face had disappeared.

At moonrise it reappeared, terrifically realistic in the pallid moonlight. It stood out horribly clear. The effect was perfectly ghastly. It was like a literal personification of the scriptural Golgotha. De Roquemort, coming up alertly, broached the news of a forced march till moonset to steady the jolted *morale* of his superstitious crew. He laughed; it was the Corsican's trick with the *Grande Armee*. So we trekked into the night, our course dead set for the mountain, never stopping till the moon had swung to the zenith and vanished behind a long black bank of driving wrack coming up from the east; immense and vague, like the familiar smoke-pall of a big metropolis. Some of it was smoke, I could have sworn—volcanic "sift."

At twelve o'clock we were beginning to ascend the swelling slopes of the mountains.

The stars died out in the sky one by one while we traveled on over the crumbling lava-clinker toward the tallest of the three peaks. The huge Satanic face, or semblance of a face, had faded out of view altogether as we approached nearer to the crater; but the over-hanging smoke wrack had grown gigantic, suggesting at its heart a nebulous dull red glow, and at intervals, a drifting rain of calcined ashes came down to us in a fine white powder on fitful gusts of wind—like the breath of mystery stirring the hoary dust of the past.

But the breaking light in the east was already heralding another day; and after a halt of several hours to rest, we went on again at nine o'clock. The Arabs, reassured in the depths of their brave, wild hearts by the very complete *insouciance* of the little Giaour's expressive military back, swaggered on with something of their old cheerfulness on the march; while the Giaour himself rode rapturously at Mrs. Rountree's side, their heads bobbing intimately together in a way suggestive of a set finale. When we halted at midday, I had found him sprawling, hypnotized, at her feet. The polite French soldier of fortune and the handsome Yankee widow of the cast, detrained together by the *scenario* of the plot, could not at all be expected to remain at odds.

At another time I should have been secretly amused. But at the moment, a bizarre thing occurred. A sound so strange, so unexpected in that

part of the world as to be even ominous and startling, awoke the echoes so weirdly that it brought us all to our feet. It was the deep-mouthed baying of a hound, which floated up eerily on the wind.

It seemed to rise from a ravine nearly two hundred yards beneath us. I glanced around to convince myself that it was not the Marquis' dog, Chasseur, who had strayed on a roving chase; but he lay quietly crunching a bone at his master's feet. It was another dog, a dog with a wild, strangely menacing note; and at the first sound of it the big Pyrenean wolf-hound sprang erect, with every hair bristling.

We leapt up, very much shaken, and, queerly enough, for it was only a dog baying, every hand instinctively went out to a weapon.

Louder and louder, that weird, deep-throated music floated up to us. Suddenly, very distinct and clear, there came an unmistakable blast of a huntsman's horn. And almost immediately, the black mouth of the ravine appeared to throw out several swiftly moving objects, the first of which came on like a bird on the wing, with wonderful bounds and leaps and a play of tossing antlers that, like its splendid, lithe body, were all coal black. Then I saw what it was.

It was a beautiful sable stag, but unlike any known species which I had ever beheld. It came on at terrific speed. Behind it, running long and low,

came a huge dog nearly as big as a lion, and lastly a gigantic man, carrying a long bow, who ran almost as fast as the dog.

The stag came on straight at us. At fifty yards, I saw the man pull up short and draw a long arrow to the head. I heard a twang as loud as a harp-string's.

I saw the black stag suddenly spring almost a dozen feet in the air, on the run, and fall back with a sound like an audible sigh. It was not ten paces away. We gathered in a silent circle around him and watched that splendid, hunted creature die. His great, liquid, almost human eyes looked up at us, full of despair; and then with a single mortal tremor, he expired, with what looked very much like an old English cloth-yard shaft buried in his vitals to the feather. But I had no time to think of that. My gaze was abruptly riveted upon the remarkable brute that had coursed the stag. It ran up with terrible swiftness to the carcass, on which, paying no attention to us, it planted its huge fore-paws and gave voice to a prolonged burst of baying which had about it a strange suggestion of a roar.

It was a great dog, indeed, but such a dog as no one among us had ever seen. It appeared to be a hybrid, crossed between a hyena and a Great Dane. It had the mastiff's short, broad ears and square jaws, with its rangy build, and, wonder of wonders, a hyena's mane. And it seemed almost twice the

size of any dog known to the civilized world, and was in color a remarkable dark yellow shot with black. Its eyes were perfectly green. They had the opaque transparence of a cat's.

The Marquis mechanically stepped closer, his hand on his pistol, though he had no idea of molesting the queer beast. Not so with the great hound Chasseur. Like his master, he was a gentleman born, and carried about him a gentleman's loathing for the *canaille*.

Advancing slowly with bristling hair, the big wolfhound, who was himself a dog of notable size and ferocity when aroused, leaped abruptly without a sound, straight at the hybrid's throat. What followed was startling. The hybrid's extraordinary eyes seemed to shoot flame. With catlike swiftness, he shook off his foe, and suddenly seized him at the base of his neck and gave one quick, terrible crunch, his great jaws snapping shut like the teeth of a steel trap.

That was the passing of Chasseur. The wolfhound died in those steel jaws. The other dog relaxed his deadly grip then and contemptuously flung him away. The Marquis watched his passing with a bitter face. He was shaken out of his *sang froid*, for once. Tears sprang to his eyes; he said surprisingly at last:

"*Requiescat*. . . . He would have pined away in France. *Peste*, I do not blame the dog. He had

to defend himself. Name of a devil, what a brute! *Ma foi!* and the master——" He froze up abruptly. There was the crunch of footsteps upon the lava clinker, and then a dead, astonished silence.

A figure in barbaric leopard-skins that caught the sunlight stalked through the circle and confronted us in a silence that nobody seemed able to break—as if he had held us all in a spell. It was that of a colossal mulatto with a rather terrifying cast of features. He had a yellow-gray skin, long, straight, coal-black hair and steel-gray eyes—it flashed into my mind that they were like Ingulf's eyes, though the man's skin was darker. He was armed with a great bow and a dagger with a cross-hilt, hung to a steel chain, and carried a huntsman's horn.

We stared at him, amazed and a little awed. He was plainly not afraid of us at all. That struck me as a bit peculiar. *Was there a reason?* Was he aware that others like himself—a race of giants—were in easy call of a single blast on that long horn by his side? The idea was alarmingly uncomfortable. Even our fire-arms failed to impress him when Torres, the Portuguese, to try him, suddenly presented a pistol in his face, but he never blenched or cringed. But at the ladies he cast so significant a stare that they were obliged to turn their backs, blushing furiously.

"Begad, gentlemen," said Lord Chalmes, with a laugh, "the beggar couldn't tell a pistol from a

pipecase—but he knows a pretty face when he sees one!"

The Marquis addressed the colossus variously in all the Bantu dialects he knew. Then he tried Swahili and Arabic. There was no reply. At each attempt he shook his head, pointing to the mountains.

"Wait a bit," said Sherry. "I've a man who can spout his particular lingo!" and he dragged Ingulf forward. At sight of him, the other started and said something in a barbaric tongue. I was amazed to hear Ingulf reply, though haltingly, with the dazed air of a man to whom the memory of familiar things slowly comes back.

Dr. Ivarsson listened with his head cocked off to one side, and I saw a shadow of disappointment pass over his face. I heard him mutter, "It is not the same." He clawed at my arm, and said aloud: "Six or seven centuries of miscegenation have corrupted the tongue. Only the lingual type, the structural form, remains."

But I had turned away, bewildered, to Ingulf.

"Speak, man!" I demanded. "Who is he?" and Ingulf, who seemed dazed, replied mechanically:

"A huntsman of the white King—of the King who dwells in the city on top of the mountains."

"On top of the mountains!" I echoed. "He is mad." But Dr. Eric Ivarsson, with a light breaking over his wrinkled face, stared at me with a triumphant smile.

"Aye," he said—he was hopping about with excitement—"and where else should it be but on top of the mountains, probably in an extinct crater. That is why no explorers have ever found it—it is the City of the Lost! . . . But we shall find it, and the Saga shall come true. They always do, my good friend!"

The Doctor fell a-cackling.

"*So!*" he mumbled, "run this fellow to earth in his own kennel and we shall see! Bid him lead us to the King's place," and Ingulf complied, pointing to the cliffs.

The other frowned and shook his head, then by way of answer, significantly tapped the cross-hilt of his dagger with a sardonic flash of eyes and show of alarming teeth. So unmistakable was this bit of byplay, which was as good as a pantomime, that it brought a dark flush to our Homeric henchman's face. With one bound, he was at the man's shoulder; while Mrs. Rountree screamed.

The pair stood glowering like wolves about to spring at each other's throats. Then suddenly Ingulf's grim face was thrust forward till it was almost within an inch of the fellow's chin, and a flame like death seemed to leap from his eyes as he repeated his words in a guttural growl. Slowly the other's dark face blanched till at last, with a cringing gesture of one who has met his master, he bowed low, stretching out one arm before him, in a strange, half Eastern salaam; then pointed up to

the towering wall of cliffs which formed the crater's mighty lip.

They lay upon the sky-line, clothed in their overpowering silence, like the walls of Valhalla itself! Some frightful earth-convulsion of ages gone had set them where they stood like a grim gray line of giant battlements guarding their monstrous secret from the world outside. Beyond them was—what? Land of lost Vikings—that unreal city of the desert mirage—or only some savage *kraal* peopled by a fallen race, such as Africa is full of; the nameless fungi that cling to the dead roots of the past; the pitiful, scattered dust of the potter's clay, swept up from the vanished marble floors and kingly halls that had flourished in a civilization which had sent even the brave Roman eagles reeling back, in an age when Carthage was mistress of the seas. What was the secret of the crater? Could we cross those frowning ramparts of mystery? And if we could, would any of us live to return?

The cowed colossus threw the carcass of the stag upon his back and set off with great strides over the clinker, beckoning us to follow. His huge dog trotted bristling at his master's heels, while we took up our march in their wake. The donkeys with the Maxims followed stoically through a storm of curses from the Swahilis; they were used to the rough going. But the ladies were presently obliged to dismount and walk as we crawled slowly up the mountainside, making for the cliff-wall. The last

quarter of a mile took us nearly an hour to climb, and it was eleven o'clock when we had finally reached the foot of the cliffs and gazed up with mingled emotions at their tremendous and nearly perpendicular walls of black basalt, which cast an enormous shadow at the base, producing a weird illusion of dusk in the broad daylight. They soared straight up to the snow-line and ended in one wild rank of naked crags whose upper bastions were half hidden from sight by a white veil of trembling mist.

De Roquemort stared with a glum face from those naked walls of rock to his machine-guns, and back to the heights above, and his jaw fell. He could read no answer to that riddle.

"*Morbleu!*" cried he. "What a place! As well ask a gnat to lift an ox as try to scale those heights unless one could walk up them like a fly!"

But our strange guide had disappeared around a turn of the cliffs, with Ingulf barely half a pace behind him. We followed, and saw him beckon us to advance. The cliff-wall, for fifty feet or more, made a sharp turn, then flattened like the side of a tall building, and we stood at length before a yawning black hole in the rock, with a dim resemblance to a colossal arched doorway big enough to allow a dozen horsemen to ride in abreast. It looked like the very gates of Hell.

Some sense of awe and fear came over us all as we stared into its grim depths; and Norma, at my

elbow, could not repress a shuddering exclamation of dismay.

"Good Heavens!" she faltered, "*must* we go in there, Mr. Severn?"

I tried to reassure her with a laugh, but it stuck in my throat.

"Unfortunately," I said, "we must." And turning to the imperturbable Marquis, I added: "There is the solution of your riddle—you could take a battery of big guns through it if you had them. That hole probably goes right through the crater's wall."

He looked at me as though I had read his mind.

"The end of the trek . . ." quoth he.

"And a dashed good job, begad!" Lord Chalmes broke in, peering, astounded, into the black mouth of the tunnel. "Damme, ye know, this beats the London tubes! You rotters may stay here until you petrify, but I am going in to meet the Gorgon!"

As languidly as he would have sauntered into one of his Piccadilly drawing-rooms, he stepped into the dark gates of the unknown!

Then we all advanced into the cave.

The Arabs, at a sign, closed up around the women, unslinging their rifles as they went. The donkeys had to be literally dragged by main force into the tunnel, trembling in animal terror at every step. The narrow shaft of light from without pierced the arched vault for barely a hundred and fifty feet, then the shadows lengthened till I could

scarcely make out the dim form of our guide moving ahead of us, with Ingulf gliding like a ghost behind him.

In the gloom, I saw the man's shadowy figure stoop over and heave at something at his feet. It came up abruptly and rolled over with a clatter on the stone floor, while our guide staggered back, shielding his eyes involuntarily from the column of dazzling flame which instantly leaped straight up to the roof from the hole in the floor, illuminating the cave for hundreds of yards with a glow like fifty electric arcs. It was nothing but a great burning jet of natural gas released from some underground well, and lighted by the simple expedient of removing the slab of rock, which I now perceived was round, like the iron lids that fit the manholes in the pavements, and had a stone ring sunk in the top. To put out the flame, it was merely necessary to replace the lid, when the column of gas sank back into its subterranean reservoir.

There was nothing supernatural about it. The thing was simplicity itself. Nature had furnished the stone pipes—man had merely turned on the gas. After the first shock of surprise we went on quite calmly in the friendly glow of that tall shaft of flame, which lit up the tunnel as brightly as the interior of some great railway terminal. It showed nothing but bare, slanting walls of black basalt, in places fully sixty feet high and moist with the dripping of water from some unexplained source.

There was not a trace of a sculptured figure nor a line of inscription anywhere.

On we went till the shadows deepened and the pillar of fire grew dim behind us. The winding passage made another turn and we stood in the darkness until out grim conductor heaved upon another stone ring in the rock, with the same result as before; out leaped the burning gas to the roof. There were three of these vent holes through which the gas rushed out, each of which was ingeniously fitted with a stone lid fastened by iron chains. They were never left burning by the people who used the passage, the practise being to extinguish them at each relay or "station" of the way. Our guide, with Ingulf still following like a shadow at his heels, had already gone back to put out Number One, and we waited, huddled in a weird-looking crew beyond the burning pillar, and making, perhaps, the strangest company its glare had ever lighted.

"Isn't it madly gorgeous!" Miss Buckerton murmured. The colossus came gliding back. "Oh, for a paint palette and a rainbow brush! It is romance . . . Sindbad the sailor; Prester John; Aladdin and the wonderful lamp! What a scene for a Jules Verne to describe!"

"It is uncomfortable romance!" said Norma, "like Bluebeard's castle. Don't stand and rhapsodize, Alline! Aren't we near the exit yet, Mr. Severn?"

"Apply to the Guard," I replied with mock

gravity. "It's my first trip, you know," and she laughed. We advanced down the dim vault.

Presently I could feel an unmistakable downgrade, and the sheer, dark walls of basalt rapidly converged until they stood not more than the height of a man above the rocky floor and barely four feet apart. The weird glow of the fiery pillar faded and went out, as the passage took a couple of unexpected turns, like a labyrinth in the Roman catacombs.

It was horribly dark. It was as though the gloom of night had suddenly fallen across the day. In ten seconds we had lost all sense of direction. Fortunately we had a few wax matches left, which Lord Chalmes had brought in a pocket of his shooting-coat from London, and one of the Arabs possessed a bronze lamp of native make, full of palm oil. After a violent squabble, the donkey drivers had pounced upon it; I could hear them cursing in chorus behind us in the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI

"VALKYRIA!"

WE groped our way in the shadows round an unexpected turn of the wall, into a dazzling flood of light that burst upon us like a physical shock. A weird blue-white pillar of brilliant fire glowed like a thousand stars in the center of a great vaulted cave, as large as the nave of a cathedral. Looking about us, I saw that we were standing near a yawning hole in the floor, fifty feet across, and apparently bottomless, for the light fell aslant the pit and ended in a black line of mystery more than a hundred feet below. A broad stone coping ran all around the pit, obviously intended for the safety of pedestrians. But it was not the physical features of the place, though they were extraordinary enough, that held us all rooted to the spot.

"Look!" Lord Chalmes burst out, amazed. "The gas is aglow! . . . Curse it, we've got company in Hades!"

At the farther side of the pit, a group of gigantic men stood watching us in silence. There were about a dozen in all. They were nearly all of

colossal stature, but their rather repulsive features were stamped with an unmistakable Negroid strain. They had the same yellow hue and straight black hair as our guide; but unlike the latter, they wore long black cloaks of some coarse linen cloth, with a sort of monkish cowl, and were unarmed, so far as we could see.

The next thing I saw was a dark-looking object that stood on a platform close to the edge of the pit, which, on closer scrutiny, proved to be a primitive windlass. It had a great reel of fiber cable ending in a rather gruesome iron hook. The presence of such an anachronism in that place somehow quite staggered me. It was like a stage property that didn't fit the play. The men on the platform had obviously lowered something into that appalling hole. What it was, I could only conjecture, but the whole procedure struck me as being uncanny. Our guide had already joined the group of men on the platform. We saw him point at us significantly, while the men across the pit stood watching us.

"Speak! Who are those men?" I demanded of Ingulf.

He muttered vaguely, half to himself:

"The descendants of the Ethiopians . . . the accursed priests of the Skull!"

Then before I could utter a word, a blood-curdling scream came from the depths of the pit. It was echoed by a hoarse cry in a frightful pitch

of bass—a deep, nerve-shaking note that froze us all rigid.

"*Jesu!*" the Portuguese gasped out, gray with fear. "Let us get out of this horrible place."

He was brave, too, in his way, was this swarthy Señor Torres; I had seen him cool as an icicle, in action, facing death without blenching. The place had got upon his nerves. As for me, I was in a cold sweat.

A wolfish smile flitted across the faces of the men at the pit's edge, and then they did a rather horrible thing. That whole mysterious, black-cloaked crew groveled on the stones together in a posture of abominable supplication, stretching out their arms weirdly until their heads bobbed on the ground, and droned out what seemed to be a prayer to the Thing in the pit. That dreadful chant, that shocking travesty of a creed, somehow turned me sick; and for a moment, I turned my face away. Perhaps it was done to awe us; at any rate, theirs was an evil religion.

When I looked again, the priests had finished their muttered chant. I watched their dim, tall figures rise and glide across the cave, like a row of ghosts, and vanish through an opening in the wall. Then, seeing our guide beckon to us unmistakably, we followed and presently discovered from the draft of fresh air blowing inward on our faces that we were coming out into the enormous cup of

the crater. Ahead of us, a pale glimmer of daylight appeared in the passage, and the air freshened as we advanced. Presently the entrance widened and we were out in the blinding sunlight.

The Arabs emerged praising Allah into their beards, and staring to right and left; but suddenly fell into a wordless silence. Even De Roquemort, abruptly shaken from his iron calm, pulled up as if petrified; while his lordship so far forgot himself as to swear audibly. But Dr. Eric Ivarsson, his warped features ablaze with triumph, pointed to the east.

"Look!" he cackled; "do you believe the Sagas now?"

Along the eastern wall of cliffs, not more than four or five miles from us, a dim mass of colossal masonry rose upon the scarred flanks of the mountainside. It was a city, but a city such as none of us ever saw! Row after row of wide paved courts and dwellings and temple fanes, with many a barbaric Eastern spire and dome—all built apparently of massive blocks of limestone—frowned almost level with our eyes; and a grim tall citadel loomed dimly in the center, like a hoary survival of some feudal age!—and over it all was the weird, mad beauty of the East! Like some very fortress of the gods, that white city gleamed out against the gray silence of the cliffs; rising, tier above tier, under the intense blue sky; with its lush green terraces all asleep in the blazing, tropic sun; while the

heavy scent from its flower-starred gardens drifted back to us on the passing breeze. I stared spellbound, as if I had seen the fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon itself come back to earth!

A cry broke from Ingulf's lips.

"Valkyria! . . . Valkyria!"

It was the city of the mirage days ago.

"Ibrahim raved of the quarries," said the voice of De Roquemort. "He raved of the overseer's lash, and the pitiless sun. . . . They broke his heart with toil—those devils. Look, there are the ancient limestone quarries on the cliffside."

Señor Torres' swarthy face suddenly turned gray.

"We go into the lion's jaws!" he said with a shudder. "Señor Marquis, what if that fate of Ibrahim be ours? *Jesu!* And the women?"

"Bah! *camarade,* your nerves are unstrung. Have you forgotten how you swept the Giant's Table, back yonder in Matabeleland? Harkee! if it comes to that, we can teach these *canaille* that we are their masters! Ha! El Zanek, what say you, old jackal of the desert?"

"*Kismet! Kismet!*" the Arab replied monotonously; but a gleam of avarice blazed up in his yellow face. "*Effendi,* there is much to gain yonder, if it comes to blows. Perchance there may be *houris* of Paradise for some. . . . As Allah liveth, it is too late to turn back now. Let us enter the city, and chance it."

"Aye, old buzzard," quoth Lord Chalmes, "well said! It is too late to cut and run. Look yonder!" he added, pointing to where a road wound down the cliffs, "there is the road to the city, and our friends of the cloth are waiting. It will never do to let them think we are afraid. We must go on."

A furlong ahead of us, the priests had already turned into the road. We followed them, with the Maxims significantly brought up in the van. The ladies, mounted once more upon their sure-footed riding-donkeys, rode merrily behind the guns, dropping a running volley of exclamations at the wonderful panorama that lay spread out before us.

The road ran straight along the cliff-wall to the city, where it turned off in a great sweeping curve to the eastward, over a green rolling plain where herds of long-horned cattle and other animals which Dr. Ivarsson's binoculars showed unmistakably to be horses grazed placidly in the mellow afternoon haze. The fertile valley below us could not have been less than forty or fifty miles across from crest to crest, and was shaped like some enormous punch-bowl that lay in the Titanic lap of the crater. In the middle of the punch-bowl lay a magnificent sheet of blue water many miles in extent, fed by the mountain streams that gushed from the western face of the cliffs; and with the glass, I could make out on its surface several white-sailed craft, as well as some that appeared to be propelled by oars like the Roman galleys and the ships of the Vikings. The out-

let of the lake was a broad river winding across the plain until it was lost in the distance. I discovered later that the river finally broke through the crater's rim in a terrific gorge scarcely second in grandeur to the Victoria Falls, and flowed down to the sea over the great table-lands of East Africa.

In half an hour we were close enough to the city to see that it was protected by a strong wall, loop-holed in front with narrow barred embrasures for archers to shoot from; with stone watch towers in which no sentries stood on guard, for the land was at peace. From the higher level of the roadway, I could see rows of narrow streets all running into a great central artery which seemed to lead straight up to the sheer, frowning keep that loomed like a shadow at the city's heart, with something cruel and menacing in the powerful sweep of its grim gray walls. Down that wide paved causeway the inhabitants of the town were already thronging like a swarm of ants, or scurrying in panic from the market-places, as we advanced straight to the city's gates.

Suddenly, the long blast of a horn floated out across the still air. As if by magic, armed men appeared on the wall; steel cap and corselet glittering in the sun.

A dozen yards from the wall, we halted.

The priests strode up and knocked upon the gate, and we waited. Presently there came the challenge of a sentry, which was answered by the request to

open, and after a brief delay the priests were admitted. Before we could follow, the great iron wings of the gate had swung back with a clash, leaving us outside.

But the horn rang out again with a burst of martial music, and a group of tall men in glittering scale-armor, armed with long-handled battle-axes, advanced along the parapet, attending a gallant-looking fellow in close-fitting chain-mail, with a long cross-hilted sword at his hip, who was plainly a person of rank, as well as one fitted by natural intelligence to play the part of a herald; often a difficult one, as history has proved.

He was young—not more than twenty-three or four—but had the trunk and limbs of a Hercules, with a gallant face lit up by a pair of piercing gray eyes that swept us all in with a single keen glance, as he took a soldier's inventory of our array. I marked, too, that this young man who had the air of a prince and the keen, confident eye of a soldier, was several shades lighter in color than any of the others.

He came striding down alone to the edge of the parapet, where he eyed us as fearlessly as a young hawk. At sight of the women he started, and a shadowy smile flitted over his face. Then abruptly, he lifted his mailed hand, with one deep-chested word which we afterward discovered was—

"Peace!"

"Skall!" (Hail) replied Eric Ivarsson in-

stantly, speaking an archaic form of the Norse tongue, which, to our amazement, the other evidently understood, for he gave a start.

"Say on," said Eric, "Jarl or King's son—be you what you may! But look to your archers and henchmen, Jarl, lest they do us a harm from the wall, and bring ruin on you and yours, for we have fatal fire-weapons that could sweep you and them away like dead chaff, ere you draw an arrow to the bow!"

The bold words of the old Norseman, which he interpreted in a brief aside, while he watched those above, had their effect. It was both a bold and wise way to deal with those brave barbarians, whose hands, as he had shrewdly guessed, were ever too ready with a weapon in a land where life was unhappily all too cheap.

"By the bones of the dead!" quoth the man in mail, visibly awed. "You talk like a Jarl yourself. Who are you who speak in the tongue I learned at my father's knee?—though men speak it here no more," he added with a trace of regret. "Whence come you?"

The ex-professor of Oxford laughed, as he looked at that noble boy in armor, where he stood staring down—a Viking every inch, from his mail corselet to the grim blade hung at his hip, as real as if he had stepped out of a Saga but yesterday!

"We are Berserkers all," replied Eric craftily, "and men from overseas; sea-cocks and adventurers

all, as you may be too, if you choose! Tidings have we to bridge the gulf of years—aye, man, of Eyulf and Hengist; of Ull the Old, and Ralf o' the Bow; and many another long dead. . . . And now, Jarl, bid your men open the gate and take us to your King, for we have a word for him. Come, is it a bargain, young Sir?"

"Aye," said the young man at length, "I see that you are men of the right old breed. And for myself, I am the Prince Hâkon, nephew of Fágu the King, and King's heir—unless a son be born, which men doubt. Forget not the pay, Sir Rover—such tales like me well. In with you, then!"

And he ran down to open the gate, bidding his henchmen stand aside while we passed within.

As we passed in we saluted Prince Hâkon with that wild Norse greeting "Skall!" as Eric Ivarsson taught us to do—all save the Arabs; and the pretty efforts on the part of the ladies to repeat the unfamiliar word sent a smile flickering over his handsome face, as he bowed like a *preux chevalier*. But Ingulf he never noted or seemed to recognize then, nor did any other, so long as Ingulf kept to himself. And that mystery remained where it was.

So we went into the city, and presently the last man had gone through the gateway. I heard the ponderous iron gates close with a hollow clang behind us, and a great bolt shot home. As it fell, my heart suddenly sank with the vague presage of

some unknown, shadowy disaster hovering over us. Turning to look, I met De Roquemort's comprehending eyes.

"Trapped!" I said bitterly. "Mad as March hares! We have put our necks into the snare."

But Raoul de Roquemort only laughed grimly.

"Mark how yonder broad street runs straight up to the keep," he said. "We could sweep it clear in five minutes, and blow the gate from its supports. A pretty adventure, my friend, but I fear you judge it wrong. We are safe enough—if I can read the face of that boy in steel."

And he turned away to whisper in Señor Torres' ear.

"It strikes me this is quite the proper time, you know, for some martial music," remarked Sherry, as we stared about us at the increasing throngs of yellow-skinned people. "It will lend a triumphal air to our entry."

And he dived into a bag, from which he presently fished out, to my amazement, no less than his cherished bagpipes; a little more dusty and battered, and stiff and shrunken from the heat, but with a tune left in them still. In a moment, he had clapped the rusty mouth-piece to his lips and piped out a strange, quavering prelude whose effect on that grim-eyed crowd was electrical.

The American girl burst into a hysterical laugh.

"You perfectly adorable mad Englishman!" the

girl cried, clapping her hands. He grinned, and instantly started off to the tune of "The Campbells are Coming!"

The Arabs, stiffening instinctively their ragged backs at the never forgotten quaver of their own wild native pipes, fell into step behind him under the spell of that wordless command. It was strange enough to see the silent wondering crowds fall back awed, as he marched right at and through them with unseeing eyes; the pibroch at his lips. But it was stranger still to see the dark, gaunt men of the African sands, the sweepings of all the slave barracks, blindly following a mad Englishman for no better reason than that he too was brave as they, and that he played for them on his broken-down bellows the airs of an alien land!

We went on swiftly up the long street, keeping step with the wild skirl of the pipes, toward the frowning buildings at its upper end, which from their size I guessed to be the King's palace and outbuildings. As we went, the increasing throngs of people crowded the walks on either side, showing a liking to push and jostle one another after the fashion in more civilized cities; but a stern word from Prince Hâkon to his guards caused them to shove the people back, beating them with the flat of their weapons when the press grew too great.

Presently we had come to the palace wall, where a wide deep moat filled with stagnant green water stopped us. The shrill music of the pipes brought a

sentry running from the palace gates. He peered at us in wonder, and went back to his fellows more swiftly than he had come. The pipes had stopped and the piper was staring curiously about him. Then at the blast of a horn sounded by a guard, several men of darker complexions than the others—apparently slaves—began to lower the cumbrous drawbridge across the moat by the aid of a great winch and chains. Finally it was down, and in five minutes more our whole company had crossed.

Entering the tall arched gateway we found ourselves in a noble court-yard paved with cobblestones, at the farther side of which a flight of broad stone steps led to the main corridors of the palace. It was built of great blocks of hewn stone—the firm-grained dolomite quarried from the cliffside and once white; but now gray with the hoar of time, covered with close-twined lichens and creeping ivy. The outer side of the stone was undressed, but joined with unmistakable mortar. It was all strangely like some old feudal keep of the Middle Ages, with its grim strong walls pierced with narrow, monk-like windows set high to the sun. But there was about it too a vague suggestion of Eastern architecture, in the fashion of the Alhambra—that wonderful, romance-haunted fortress of the Moorish kings in Spain. I had never seen the Alhambra; but I had seen pictures of it, and here were almost the same long low galleries and carven arches, supported by pillars strangely shaped; but never a trace of the Runic

writings of the Norsemen—at least none that we could see.

As we came to the first flight of steps, Prince Hâkon stopped us civilly, while he despatched a herald to announce our presence to Fágu the King. The man vanished through one of the vaulted doorways, and we waited, while De Roquemort spoke swiftly to El Zanek in an undertone. Like a wise general who never took unnecessary chances, he was posting his rear-guard to command the line of retreat, while he himself with the rest would walk boldly into the lion's den. He had left his main force without, to cut off any treachery from the rear. It was a master-stroke that increased my respect for the man.

I saw the Arabs, at Señor Torres' swift orders, coolly turn the machine-guns to sweep both the steps in front and the palace gates. The men-at-arms and the Prince did not interfere; they were ignorant of the significance of this move on the chessboard. It was with a lighter heart than I had owned for many a day, that I watched the turn of affairs, while we waited for the King to signify his royal pleasure.

In a few minutes it was done; we held the key to the city. A long stone outbuilding flanking one side of the courtyard, which was evidently the quarters of the King's scullions and the palace slaves, stood in easy reach of the gates. Here Prince Hâkon—all unwitting that he had given away the keys of the palace with a snap of his noble finger—presently

found quarters for our retainers, bidding the slaves find a new domicile. To him, it meant nothing—merely the harborage of a handful of wanderers whom his steel-clad soldiers could surround and overpower at a word, or pick off one by one with their great bows that loosed as fatal a cloth-yard shaft as ever the White Company or Robin Hood himself and his merry men had launched against their foes. How should he know—that brave barbarian, whose bold heart was as free from guile as a mountain stag's, whose mailed hand had the bear's grip of his Viking forefathers who would have torn the prey from the iron jaws of Fenris, the pagan's wolf of Fate, and whose soldier's eye was as keen and sure as an eagle's, drifting in the wild summer sky—how should he know that the world had so greatly changed without, while he and his remained arrested as their fathers before them, and that men's cunning brains and deadly hands for centuries had been fashioning terrible weapons of destruction before which his mailed warriors would quail, as the slaves had quailed from the last remnant of the Norsemen? How should he know all this?

So he gave away the key to the kingdom, with a smile on his handsome, soldierly face—as Montezuma and his Aztecs had given it away to Cortez long before him! Meanwhile we waited for the herald to return from the King, till at last the man's tall figure appeared beckoning to us to advance, and we followed Prince Hâkon up the steps.

Down the wide, tiled corridor we went, our footsteps echoing on the marble floor, until presently the main corridor divided in two and we turned into that which led to the left. Exactly alike, they swept out to right and left like the letter "Y," although each had, as I soon discovered, the same objective—the great central hall of the palace. It was an arrangement modern rulers might do well to copy, for it had its obvious advantages. Needless to say, he who went in to the King could not see him who came out; and thus friends might go in one door and foes come out the other. At the end of the corridor was a narrow, curtained doorway.

Suddenly a man in scale-armor, with a great battle-axe in his hand, stepped out from behind the curtain. He was a gigantic mulatto, with a face like a devil. At sight of the Prince he let his axe fall in a martial salute and bowed low, with the barbaric cringing gesture we had seen before. Stepping back, he drew the curtains aside significantly.

Then we passed through the door.

CHAPTER XVII

THE RED KING

A COLOSSAL man, with a barbaric, dull gold crown on his head and a short red beard, was sitting on a raised dais facing the two doors. He sprawled there wearily enough in his great ivory seat, with its massive arms made of red gold that caught a long shaft of sunlight falling from the high-peaked windows behind him. The chair in which he sat was almost as remarkable as the man, for the back of it was made of six gigantic tusks curving down over his leonine head, and its ivory feet were cunningly carven in the shape of a lion's claws. Standing around the dais, motionless as statues, were ranged some fifty men in scaly armor, leaning on their long battle-axes. They were all tall men with dark, grim faces of a mulatto type; and as they stood there with the light playing on their axes, strange thoughts came surging up into my brain. I thought, indeed, of the long dead Varanger Guard whose invincible courage had failed to save the fallen Byzantine dynasty they served so well, and, in an instant, I could almost hear the wild shouts of the Berserkers come ringing out across the dim and empty silence of centuries gone!

As for the man on the dais, it needed but one look at him to tell us that this was the King—the stamp of power was on him. Even had he worn neither crown nor royal robes, it was easy enough to see that he was the master here; for the most of that idle, silent throng about him, while they watched us surreptitiously from the tail of their eyes as we advanced, never let their gaze wander far from his great, powerful, weary, florid face. His features were cruel and sensual to a degree, it struck me, as I came nearer to him, and somewhat bloated from the effects of hard drinking. He was white—or nearly white; but the lips were thick, and somewhere in the dark veins which stood out like cords upon the bloated face there was an unmistakable hint of the pollution of a lower race, which, in the King, was more pronounced than in Prince Hâkon, his nephew.

Clearly, the royal caste, or as it was known, "the *Mohanza,*" had tried and failed to keep the blood pure through the long centuries of miscegenation which had finally absorbed and swallowed up the Norse conquerors, leaving only the shadow of their former greatness behind them in their warlike customs and in the heritage of their magnificent physiques.

We stopped in front of the dais, and the King stood up. He lacked but an inch or so of being seven feet tall, and might have posed for a life-sized statue of Hercules. Slowly his bloodshot, steel-

gray eyes traveled over and past us, and settled with a fascinated stare upon the women.

A disturbed, feminine flutter went on at my elbow.

The royal stare was brutally direct. All his air of weariness fell away in an instant. He came to life like some abruptly thawed snake. I felt a quick, involuntary grasp on my arm. A little white hand clutched it convulsively. It was Norma; she had been unlucky enough to meet the King's eyes—and at something the girl read there, she shuddered!

I kept quiet, out of sheer amazement at that man's enormous size—his cold, appalling ferocity of snake-like concentration. I remained absolutely frozen. But the incident did not escape Lord Chalmes, for his face had darkened and he was toying with his pistol.

There was a diversion, as King Fágu's tall huntsman, whose name, as we had found out, was Agi, pushed his way past the crowd of priests and courtiers and threw the stag he had slain down before the King. He groveled abjectly, with the barbaric gesture which seemed to be the fashion. Presently he got up, and pointing to us, poured out in his outlandish tongue what was evidently the tale of his meeting with us on the mountains and our coming through the wall of the crater. Prince Hâkon threw in a nod, and Fágu listened inscrutably. But the Doctor, his head cocked off to one side, harked to him in evident disappointment. He could make nothing of the mulatto's villainously corrupt speech.

The Red King waved him off good-humoredly, as if he had been a familiar and faithful hound, and once more turned to us. The Doctor instantly seized his cue and stepped forward with a sweeping, courtly bow.

"Hail!" said Eric, and the King started at the sound of his own tongue, which, as we afterward discovered, was only spoken by the ruling class at court; just as French became the language of the English court after the Norman conquest.*

"Speak!" he said. "What men are you?" and his face showed his astonishment. "How knowest thou the language none but Kings have spoken for generations gone?"

Eric's cock-and-bull story would have turned all of his learned colleagues of Oxford positively green with envy!

We were Vikings and Jarls' sons all, quoth he, with many a wild Northern oath; and envoys of great Kings oversea. The Arabs were our slaves. The fair ladies were shipwrecked Princesses of Cathay, that we had rescued after a great land-fight

*The common people spoke another tongue, apparently a corrupt form of the Abantu language; though it was interspersed with many Arabic words, and its origin is open to doubt. It was comparatively easy to learn. But it was weeks before my companions, with the exception of the Marquis de Roquemort, who is a born linguist, were able to express themselves with any sort of success in the court language of the Mohanza, the ruling class of the extraordinary, isolated people of Valkyria. I have accordingly assisted my good friend, Sir Alan Severn, in setting down much of the conversations recorded in this book.—Footnote by Dr. Eric Ivarsson, of Oxford University, F.R.G.S.

with an Ethiopian army to the south. And he told a red tale of slaughter. To win a princely reward, we were going to take them home to their natural protectors—all in due course, said Eric. Odin's bane be on him who laid a finger-bone on them! . . . Better for him that he had never looked upon a woman! He swore by the pagan gods that we would blast any who tried with our flame-weapons (as we had done to the Ethiopians), and deliver them to the Wolf of Nastrond. Also he, Eric the Berserk, would go to the trouble to put such a blight on that offender as would make his flesh rot from off his bones, until at last he died and went howling to Nifleheim.

And he fixed an uncomfortable eye on the King with so intent a look—like another Ancient Mariner—that at last even Fágu's hard eyes fell before it, and he sat down, strangely awed and shaken; somewhat like him who asked:

> "By thy long gray beard and glittering eye,
> Now wherefore stop'st thou me?"

But when Eric hinted at treaties with certain mighty potentates, which should make King Fágu greater than ever he was, the Red King sat up straight in his ivory chair and laughed a great, deep-chested laugh.

"Mayhap your kings have much to gain and little to lose, O Wanderer!" said he. "Treaties make I with none. If they seek aught of me, let them come and take it, if they can! As for you who speak so

boldly in the lion's lair, bethink you that they are there and you are here. They cannot help you here."

"Then we will help ourselves," said Eric grimly.

"Spoken like a man!" quoth the King. "Ever I have loved bold hearts, though men dub me 'Fágu the Butcher,' behind my back. But fear no treachery from me. For the passing hour, you are safe. What use to cut the harp-strings ere the song is sung? . . . to break too soon the tablets from the world without! Perchance I know more than you think of your grim, smoke-wreathed cities and the strange things men have fashioned over the seas. Ask me not how, O wanderers!"

His ironic, even tones died mockingly away and there was silence. The red blaze of the dying sun, streaming down behind him, had stained him a vivid crimson as he sprawled, chin on hand, in his barbaric throne, and turned his red beard to fire. Only the wrinkled Doctor had understood. To the rest of us the King's face was a baffling study in hypocrisy, in which burned eyes of lambent flame, terrible to see.

A faint stir ran through the throng of courtiers. The curtains of the two doors had moved, and footsteps came echoing down the marble floors.

A barbarically beautiful girl came out of one door first. She was a splendid creature, almost white; with great melting liquid eyes, and hair like some wonderful tropic night. As she came gliding up the hall another faint sigh of admiration rose and died

away, for the elfish breeze from the curtained door had slightly stirred the soft gauze-like fabric of her white robe, and half revealed the perfect lines of a form such as the genius of some great sculptor has now and then infrequently given to the world.

The girl came straight up to Prince Hâkon, passing the crimson satyr in the chair with a curt, contemptuous little nod that brought a darker flush to Fágu's florid cheek—and stopped.

The boy in mail looked at her, half vexed.

"Phaïma!" he said, and that was all.

And somehow, I sensed the tie between the two, when I looked at the two clearly chiseled faces—so different, yet so much alike. Afterward we learned that the Prince was her half-brother.

Her eyes roved swiftly from one to another of us and appraised us all in turn—lingering a little upon Lord Chalmes—until presently they darted past him to the women and she gave a little gasp of astonishment. Her eyes opened wide with interest.

She went over Mrs. Rountree first in minute detail, all in a well bred sort of way at which nobody could possibly take any offense. It was worth seeing, to watch the play of naïve expression on her face, as she instantly sensed the presence of something very different from her own wild, primitive world, in the American woman's superb poise. Next she examined Alline, and evidently got a distinctly new sensation. It was as if she had discovered by herself some new specimen of a very odd and

very brilliant flower. But she could not understand where its perfume came from, though she picked its queer petals to pieces! And at last she came to Norma. Presently her proud little head drooped and a rich red blush came sweeping up into her clear, olive cheek. She had found out where the perfume came from! For whatever it was she read behind those three calm, proud, pitying faces, it brought a choking, breathless sigh from her parted lips, and a vague mist of tears into her great wide eyes.

Poor savage! She was already learning the bitter lesson of civilization.

And then she saw Ingulf for the first time.

He stood there leaning on his weapon like a statue, staring at the Red King with a face like a granite mask. But his steel-gray eyes glittered like diamond points. There was a strange dignity in his strong, stern, impassive face. She watched him, half fascinated; she could understand that sort of person; and in a moment, all her embarrassment was forgotten. For apparently there seemed to be something oddly familiar about him to her, which she was trying hard to recall. But she failed, as every one else had failed to solve the weird puzzle of his past.

My mind reeled with the thoughts that came surging into it. I thought of the strange Saga of Ull the Viking, which was coming true, step by step; and of that terrible story of ill-starred Ibrahim told by De Roquemort, in the blazing firelight, months

ago . . . which had also been true! . . . What was the Thing in the pit? . . . Who was Ingulf? Was he the descendant of the old pirate "Ingulf Blackhair," who had founded the line of Valkyrian kings? Had I hit upon the master-stroke to shake the iron resolve of even that indomitable dreamer, the Marquis de Roquemort—the tacitly confessed envoy of Leopold's sordid Protectorate?

But was it true? . . . Had Phaïma or had any of these people ever seen Ingulf *before?* . . . For if they had, the years had altered him beyond their power to unmask. And I watched the two strangely baffling faces curiously.

With the queer sensation of being covertly stared at, which is like a sixth sense to most people, he turned around involuntarily and met her eyes full. And Ingulf, the silent adventurer, the soldier who so seldom smiled, smiled now, and looked back at the girl with admiration written eloquently in his face; while Phaïma suddenly colored up to the eyes. The whole affair had been as good as a play.

But we have forgotten the man who came in from the other door. He came in as noiselessly as a ghost—like a tall, black shadow; and it seemed to me that those whom he passed on his way toward the dais shrank away from him with a kind of horror, as though he had carried the plague.

He was a very tall man, as tall as the King, but

almost as fleshless as a skeleton. He was nearly coal black. Yet the dark features were aquiline, with the high broad cheek-bones of an Egyptian mummy. He wore a black robe, on the breast of which was worked out in glaring white relief the strange insignia of a skull. His face was absolutely devoid of expression; he might have been a dead man, so far as concerns the play of emotions on the average human face. But the most terrible thing about him was his eyes. They were green!

As we guessed rightly, this extraordinary personage was the high priest of the "Temple of the Skull," nicknamed by the populace, "Fangari the Black," or simply "the Black Priest," although that is stepping behind the scenes; as we all must do often enough in our lives and histories. After the King, he possessed the power of life and death in the country—and not infrequently made use of it to get rid of his enemies and confiscate their property to his infamous priesthood, after the usual fashion of the world's dark places and ages.

And so Fangari the evil, with his ghastly mummeries and human sacrifices to the mysterious Thing or ghoul in the pit, had gone on waxing greater in the land, at the expense of much mortal suffering; till there was probably no limit to his greed and his fatal power—until we arrived on the stage.

Yet there were two creeds in the land, as there were two tongues; the dim old, grim old pantheistic

worship of the pagan gods had not yet died out among the royal class. For them, the Valkyries still flew and wheeled above the battle-fields they fought; and Nifleheim and the pool of Hela still engulfed the souls of the unwary; while above it all, in Valhalla, still sat Thor and Odin and all the rest of their mighty crew, watching with their great eyes the deeds of men below, and applauding or cursing as the case demanded; while they quaffed the mead-horn between whiles, or harked to the golden harp-chords floating faintly through the dim halls of the Norseman's half human heaven, peopled by gods whose thoughts and actions were strangely like those of men. It was bad enough. But bad as it was, it was infinitely preferable to the merciless devil-creed of the priests—the monstrous survival of some dark Ethiopian myth of the past, by help of which Fangari and his familiars had cunningly contrived to set their nameless yoke upon the necks of a superstition-ridden race; ruling them by the terrors of a personal devil and a visible hell.

The Black Priest turned his expressionless face and dreadful green eyes upon us with so deathly a gaze that we shuddered at its sheer malevolence, or rather at its utter absence of all human animation. Then he leaned over and addressed the King ominously, with a grim directness that made us feel uncomfortable. We would have been even more uncomfortable had we guessed that he was demanding

the removal of ourselves to the underground "Temple of the Skull," and our servants to the limestone quarries to labor on the public works.

The tall, white-robed girl beside us, watching his face, gave a slow sigh of horror, and tears sprang up suddenly in her lovely, liquid eyes. I saw Prince Hâkon's features grow tense, and instantly sensed something wrong; while the courtiers around us seemed to catch their breath. In the strange silence that fell abruptly in that room, all eyes were riveted upon the King's impassive face. But if there was a struggle going on behind that utterly soulless mask, he gave no sign of it while the slow seconds dragged by.

Then at last the tension snapped, and Fágu shook the high priest off with a half humorous, malicious smile. The Red King held the mastery in his mailed hands; and to do him justice, he alone feared neither man, priest nor devil; though it is like enough he had a deeper purpose of his own, which he kept inscrutably to himself. The priest flashed at us another strangely evil glance, and then glided like a black shadow down the hall and out through the curtained door. It seemed to me that those about us breathed a sigh of relief when he was gone.

There was silence still, while the crimson bar of light behind the dais suddenly went out, and twilight crept into the room.

As if it had been the signal for their appearance, several handsome female slaves came in simultane-

ously from each door, carrying flaming rushlights in their hands, and glided swiftly along the walls, touching in rapid succession with the lighted rushes some fan-like stone pipes set into the carved masonry at intervals, at about the level of the eyes, after first drawing out a small metal plug located in the top of these fan-like pipes; the plugs being allowed to dangle at the end of short golden chains, for future need in extinguishing the lights. It was a most ingenious arrangement for utilizing the unlimited supply of natural gas which, as I learned later on, flowed beneath the whole city and was stored in natural reservoirs; although we were informed that it was only within the present century, or to be exact, during the reign of the previous king, that a mad Philosopher named Odag the Wise had finally perfected the present system of lighting the city—being afterwards burned for his pains by an ignorant mob incited by the priests, as one who had rashly dared to tamper with the secrets of the Unknown. But a revulsion of sentiment had later set in, and a colossal bronze statue of Odag holding a flaming torch aloft now stood in the principal square, and was the object of much veneration among all classes of the people. It was a bitter commentary upon the terrible reward which the world, in all ages, both barbarous or civilized, has so often meted out to its greatest benefactors!

As the half-nude figures of the slave girls flitted silently to and fro, fan after fan of blue-white flame

leaped out behind them as though by magic; then, in a sort of sinuous, rhythmic glide, their forms swaying as if to music, they converged all together at the center of the room. Suddenly, they grouped themselves gracefully into living ladders, and two huge central chandeliers burst into weirdly brilliant flame. It was all done so swiftly that before I had realized their final purpose, the whole great hall literally blazed with light; and with a last daring pirouette toward the dais, they were gone.

Almost at the same moment, the whole city below began to glow and coruscate with a blaze of light, as I saw through the huge, loop-holed windows behind us that overlooked the main square. At intervals of about half a mile, I could see tall columns of bluish flame blaze up at regular distances along the principal streets, which were already crowded with people. Their shadowy goblin figures passed to and fro in the maze of lights like the inhabitants of some world of dreams; and I could hear the faint roar of their traffic come floating vaguely back to us through the palace windows, mingled with the confused cries of hawkers in the market-places.

For in Valkyria, the capital, which was evidently densely populated, the hour of lighting the city was the favorite time of all classes of the people for taking the air, amid the cool breezes of the tropic evening, yet with the streets lit up almost as brightly as by day.

It was a sight to haunt the memory, and one that

I never forgot—Valkyria bursting into bloom like a great fiery flower till it was literally ablaze with lights, in the singular, throbbing hush of the swift tropic twilight, like some star-gemmed city builded by hands more than human. As I looked, it seemed but half real; and I began to wonder whether I was awake or dreaming, till I saw the others watching the lights blaze up against the darkening sky. And Alline, forgetting where she was, clapped her hands rapturously.

"Aladdin's palace!" she exclaimed. "An Arabian Nights' dream! . . . It is wonderful—perfect!"

But Norma drew her back.

"Alline," she whispered warningly, "they are staring at you!"

And then at last, my eyes came back to the room in which we stood.

It was a huge room, hardly less than a hundred feet long, and perhaps sixty feet wide. The tall windows that let in the light were nobly vaulted and embrasured like the windows of some of the gigantic old castles which still stand in parts of Europe to this day: grim reminders of a grimmer past—an age when might was right and men cared little for the peccadilloes of law and property, so long as their swords were sharp and their feudal strongholds, which amply protected master and man from the unpleasant consequences of their acts, remained all but impregnable to the simpler weapons and warfare of

their times. And as I looked around this room and at those in it, it was plain enough to me that by a strange accident of fate, they had been set back more than five hundred years in the scale of the world's progress. Here men lived and died as they had done in the thirteenth century, with small thought of the morrow or heed to the hereafter—with fiercer passions and stronger sinews, and cruder virtues, perhaps, but with fewer vices also.

As the dancing girls vanished, another bevy of beautiful slaves glided in with tankards of mead and ruby wine which they passed round to the company in tall golden beakers and medieval drinking-horns. And then began such a scene as might have been a part of the Poet's dream—

> . . . . "And in divine
> High-piping Pêhleví, with 'Wine! Wine! Wine!
> Red wine!' The Nightingale sings to the Rose,
> That sallow cheek of hers to incarnadine."

At least, we found the wine excellent, but the mead was too sickish sweet for my liking, though it found favor with the ladies. They were courteously conducted by their fair servitors to a row of low marble seats near the dais, carelessly strewn with several magnificent lion skins. It seemed to me that the King's cold eyes played up and down the faces and forms of the ladies somewhat more freely than was courteous, and that the royal gaze appeared fixed

on Norma, in particular. Over her pale, beautiful face I fancied I saw a shadow of horror pass swiftly, and she shrank back involuntarily from the too ardent stare of those lambent, glittering eyes set like slumbering flames in the bloated face that seemed to leer like a satyr at the company. Among them glided languorously the beautiful bacchantes, at whom many of the wine-flushed, ever-thirsty throng of courtiers threw boldly amorous glances as they moved half sensuously from group to group, or stopped to pour the sparkling red wine, and foaming brown mead into the golden goblets which they presented smilingly to the guests, and to us also. Watching this strange scene with tense eyes, and fascinated by it, yet repelled, I saw Norma look back appealingly at me with a nameless terror in her eyes. And as I met that electric underplay of involuntary appeal for protection against something impending, that none of us could find a name for or even shape into words, a maddening question suddenly crept into my thoughts and set my brain reeling and groping for an answer.

Why had she looked at me like that—at me, first of all? Why, indeed—when so near to her, almost at her side, stood the tall careless figure of Lord Chalmes? Had even this cold, quiet young English peer a better right to protect her against the whole world?—that man to whom I never doubted that she was affianced before this mad wind of chance had

caught her up into its terrific whirl and set her down more than a thousand miles from all of the safe, sane, civilized world she had known!

She would go back to that world, in the end, and I was very certain that he was the man she meant to marry. And I knew no good reason why that return need be put off, since we had been received by the Valkyrians with fair words, as it seemed, and in a crisis could probably keep them at bay. For even as we stood—a handful of desperate outlanders against so many—I knew that in five minutes we could have turned that lordly hall into a red shambles before the mailed men could ever use their axes. Perhaps the Red King knew that also; he was by far the cleverest man in the kingdom; and perhaps the thought may have sobered him somewhat. But as the wine began to flow freer and tongues to wag noisier we deemed it more prudent to withdraw.

And Eric rose up and craved the royal leave, and it was granted. For a fat feast was being laid smoking on the royal trenchers elsewhere, and King Fágu with all his courtiers, after the way of barbaric potentates, would presently fall to work to drink himself senseless. Which, from long practise, he was able to do very effectually.

So we went off to the quarters which had been obligingly evacuated for us by Prince Hâkon's order in a wing of the palace itself; and a noble suite of rooms they were, looking down on the great courtyard, where we could see the lounging figures of our

own valiant ruffians from our wonderful, embrasured windows, and catch the grim glitter of the Maxims in the shadow of the wall.

"A pretty castle in Spain, on my soul!" said Raoul de Roquemort musingly, as he took in the whole extraordinary scene in a sweep of the eye: palace and moat and court-yard, and the blazing, weirdly beautiful city below—"and a noble capital for a king! God grant we may never have to sweep those streets clear with the *mitrailleuse*, the 'red rain of death!'"

"When you do," I threw in quietly, "take heed to the Red King's mailed soldiers and the sample of archery that we have seen. This race is the last of the Vikings, and they will yield to no man."

He wheeled and surveyed me narrowly with his falcon eyes. "Pooh!" cried he, "they will never pass our guns. We are their masters, I tell you, after all."

"Heaven grant we are!" was my reply.

So greatly did Raoul de Roquemort, resourceful emissary of Leopold the Unready and gentleman-adventurer with a courage worthy of a better cause, misjudge what manner of men were these with whom he had to deal.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CROWN OF VALKYRIA

AND now for once, we had our fill of idle days and lordly feasts, while obsequious attendants came and went at our beck and call. With Prince Hâkon for our friend and mentor, time flew by unheeded in that marvelous, medieval city of imperial Valkyria, where men's lives and pastimes were those of more than five centuries ago. We had dropped into their midst like queer fowl from a world they had never seen; and the Valkyrians were human enough to be very curious about us and our outlandish ways, and the beautiful ladies who had arrived so wonderfully out of the Unknown. They would stop to stare at us whenever we appeared on the streets—as we did when we liked, unchallenged, often at twilight, in the strange hush of the African dusk, when the greenish lights of the city would blaze up weirdly and abruptly, until it seemed like some fantastic vision out of another world. It was a sight that Norma and Alline and Mrs. Rountree never wearied of watching; and we risked it oftener than was prudent. There was a singular, wild beauty about it all that sank into our brains and our souls.

There was a singular beauty, too, in the half-veiled olive faces and swaying, stately forms of the graceful Valkyrian women who glided rather than walked, along the white-paved streets—a gleam of languishing black eyes; a shadowy smile from red lips; a sleepy flash of coquetry, and a fascinatingly feminine hint of their own indisputable right to be admired, on which it was impossible to shut the doors of our impressions. For it was all a part of that bewildering stream of life whose changing current ebbed and flowed without a pause through the narrow streets, in the lazy, oriental air, under the broad, red-rimmed Eastern moon. And over it all hung the haunting glamour of romance.

But if we were like strange birds from the sea, we were hawks with beaks and talons which they learned to fear at last. They found out the purpose of the queer blued things that were ever ready to the hands of the white-faced rovers from the south, without which, as they had marked well, the foreign Jarls were never seen afoot. It chanced upon a day when, with the ladies all in tow, we had sallied forth from the palace and wandered happily in the late afternoon through a maze of narrow, winding streets, past the crowded market-stalls and quaintly medieval booths of silversmiths and armorers, down to the dusty quays along the water-front, where a row of low stone drinking-shops faced to the idle wharves, and here and there a long, black, empty galley washed aimlessly at anchor on

the yellow tide of the river. We had turned homeward while the dusk was falling. . . . And then . . . was it fancy, or was it the Black Priest's tall, shadowy figure that we had seen gliding up the dim street ahead of us, till at length it looked back and vanished abruptly in the dark entrance of a silent court? As we turned the corner, a roistering band of half drunken revelers lurched suddenly across our path, and as if by accident, blocked the street. They were an evil-faced crew; all in their leather jerkins, with the tools of the armorer's trade in their hands, and led by a huge ruffian with a tall red feather in his steel cap, who barred our way and leered at the women with a derisive, drunken smile.

"Aho! here, comrades all," quoth this worthy, with a laugh, in the thick, burring speech whose drift we were beginning to catch in a vague, misty fashion; "here be some pretty fowl that have flown afield out of their silken nest. At them, drunkards all, and let each catch his nightingale while he may!"

In a trice, Raoul de Roquemort's terrible yard of steel, which he wore here like one to the manner born, was out and flashing palely in the summer moonlight. But with a grim laugh, the tall man waved his henchmen back, and dropping the tools of his trade, whipped out a long straight blade and they fell to work.

Sharp and sudden the end was. Like a cat, the Marquis had glided inside that drunken ravisher's

futile guard and had run him through. He dropped dead with a horrible, short, choking sob.

"*Pah!*" muttered the Marquis, as he wiped his rapier contemptuously on the stark form, "a De Roquemort has become at last a butcher of sheep!"

But with this, the dead ruffian's fellows must needs set up a baying in the street and leap at us with drawn blades over their leader's body like a pack of hungry wolves.

Ruthlessly, we did it. It had to be done, and we did it. And of the song of war and death that was to float one day over those silent squares, on the wild voices of their fabled Valkyries, we played the grim prelude that night by the water-front.

Good or evil, it was done. When our smoking weapons were empty, there were nearly a dozen corpses huddled in a dark heap on the broad stone flags, and a single survivor had fled aghast, his foot-falls echoing faintly down the empty street. But if the Black Priest had set a snare for us—as we had guessed—he had lost his prey.

Covering up her face with both hands, Norma sobbed out brokenly, "Let us go back! . . ." And we went.

After that unpleasant episode we confined our sight-seeing to the safer quarters of the city, and our lovers' rambles to the friendlier daylight. Prince Hâkon, whose word was law, had the affair hushed up somehow; and the long days drifted by

like a procession of old-world pageants, each staged in its own strange setting—the strangest that ever I had seen. We were beginning to speak the language very badly; and by keeping my eyes and ears open, I had found out much about the country of the Valkyrians.

There were two other towns in the Northern Province—built, like Valkyria itself, inside the great chain of extinct craters; one of which, Alûki, was said to be a place of considerable size; but its inhabitants had not advanced as far in the scale—in architecture, for instance—having scarcely progressed beyond the primitive stage of mud walls. The sanguinary civil wars which for six hundred years had kept down the population of the country, the periodic rise and fall of half a dozen dynasties in as many centuries, and their own fearfully enforced feudal serfdom to the terrible mailed kings of imperial Valkyria had left them a rough race of soldiers and horse-breeders, rather than artisans. Only at the capital itself had the finer arts risen to their comparative zenith among this semi-barbaric people—so strangely cut off by terrific natural barriers from the great seething, teeming, beautiful, restless, weary world without, which, indeed, generally grinds men's bodies into ignoble dust, and their immortal souls into seared travesties of faith, far more effectually than our present "advanced civilization" is frank enough to admit. But that world they had never seen.

Valkyria held the military keys of the kingdom. Through the iron gates of the capital ran the road to Alûki; and only through Alûki could an army come to Khar, the next town of any importance. Valkyria stood like a menacing white sentinel at the only gateway to that vague, mysterious, outside world, but they could not pass that gate; for in the memory of men, few had ever gone back, and of those few none had returned. Of the few who had gone, only tradition preserved the names of that Ull the Viking and his homesick ship's crew who had stood here so long ago—a battered company of fameless mercenaries, under their dead and forgotten flag; homeless, under an alien sky—here with the changeless sun of Africa blazing down on their rusted and broken steel harness, but powerless to beat out the fires of the Wanderlust in their indomitable hearts.

To Dr. Eric Ivarsson, it was like discovering some earthly Valhalla, and he slapped his thigh and swore a most mighty vow that he would write such a pamphlet on the Vikings as would set all the archeologists of Europe gabbling like geese in a fen. And forthwith he fell to work with a gusto upon that writing, seconded by no less an ally than Alline, who, as a consequence must needs coax Sherry (armed to the teeth!) daily at her pretty heels. And followed by a gaping dozen of Prince Hâkon's guards, those three went through the crumbling, motley streets of Valkyria like fanatical servitors of Science; quest-

ing for runes and ancient carvings and sundry circumstantial evidence to bear out the Doctor's learned monograph; but unfortunately, with only indifferent success. Meanwhile I waited tensely—waited for the Marquis to play out his hand; and Mr. Cecil Rhodes' long cherished empire-building schemes seemed in a bad way of fulfilment.

There was no mistaking that the Frenchman held most of the trumps. But when and how would he play them? I wondered what his keen wits suspected. . . . For he too waited warily. There was something afoot. Most times, he would talk aside in undertones with the King's heir, Prince Hâkon—the two had become inseparable; and as they whispered together meaningly, it struck me sometimes that they had very much the air of conspirators, plotting melodramatically up-stage. But there was something significant and something sinister in De Roquemort's masklike, set smile—an icy chill in the way he would sweep that falcon glance of his contemptuously across the cold faces of the Red King's guards, whenever that impassive steel line came striding past his Maxims that faced the palace steps, there in the courtyard where we often lounged at noonday in the shade of the cool white walls, or sat smoking by the curiously carven fountains that threw their rainbow sprays of shimmering water-drops up into the clear, lazy air. And in Prince Hâkon's hawk eyes there would blaze up an answering gleam. What did it mean? Were those two

—the brave, quiet soldier of fortune, and that gallant barbarian with the wild blood of unremembered Vikings still running hot under his bronzed, olive skin—plotting to topple the Red King off his throne?

Were they? I would have sworn that they were! But if they were, the Marquis kept a curb upon his tongue. Perhaps he had guessed that another Power was afoot, that another flag might be unfurled when the storm had burst. So I held my peace and waited. Let him fight the Red King's soldiers first, and then for the final masterplay of wits between the Briton and the Gaul.

But of the Red King himself we had seen very little so far. He had shut himself up in his royal shell; and only vague, whispered rumors had reached us of the royal pastimes; of drunken debauches, of wild orgies; of horrible, nerve-shaking cries that had rung out in the night and echoed through the empty corridors. And then of a maimed and blighted courtier—the royal favorite once—who had come stumbling and groping on a morning out into the placid sunshine, with his eyes picked out—perhaps they had seen too much—and his rash tongue silenced forever by a sharp dagger-blade, drawn knowingly across its roots. *He* would never tell what he had seen!

Then one day a colossal, coal-black slave was admitted to the main ante-room of the princely suite from which young Hâkon had courteously turned himself out like a gentleman, at our need; and glid-

ing straight up to Norma, where she sat, brightly talking and jesting with the Lady Phaïma, he laid a great gold casket in Norma's lap.

"From the King! . . ." he said, cringing almost to the marble floor. "For the White Lady of Beauty, with the face like a star!"

And he bowed to the floor again, and was gone.

Norma opened the casket mechanically. And there in its yellow silken setting, lay blazing up at her a wellnigh priceless royal coronet worth a king's ransom!

She dropped it swiftly, and turned pale as death; while the crown, by some strange prank of fate, leaped from its ancient bed and rolled slowly along the marble tiles to the feet of the Lady Phaïma, where it came to rest at length with its glowing crust of jewels flashing up at her wickedly.

I saw Phaïma's lovely, flower-like face literally turn gray with fear—saw her stoop and pick up the crown, uttering never a word, but her big dark eyes had dilated with a slow stare of terror.

Then we all fell to examining the beautiful, priceless thing. It was cast from very pure gold, wonderfully carved and chased, and was crusted all over with sparkling gems of every size from a pea to a filbert—a molten flame of diamonds and sapphires and emeralds—all cut in polished facets by some cunning lapidary's art; and set into the front of the coronet, near the top, there glowed like a great red eye the most enormous ruby we had ever set

"For the White Lady of Beauty, with the face like a star!"

eyes upon. It was as big as a robin's egg, and cut as well as the best stones to be found in the London shops to-day; although the crown itself had every appearance of extreme antiquity.

Perhaps in the world's wild youth it had crowned the regal head of some dusky barbaric Queen; or perhaps of some sensuous oriental beauty of a greater race, who had worn it imperiously in her turn, till she too had vanished into the gulf of time. Perhaps it had been the royal heritage of some black-eyed Eastern Princess who had been human enough to marry and to forgive her Viking conqueror—the stalwart, gallant sea-rover whose ruthless biting blade had hewed down all her kindred before he offered her the rough atonement of his love. There was no telling what heads that royal coronet had lain upon in its day. Yet as I looked at it, I swore a great oath that it should never gleam on Norma's. But Prince Hâkon was staring at this singular scene with a dark flush of shame on his cheek, and gray eyes that glittered like the diamonds in the crown.

"The crown of Valkyria!" he said bitterly, "thrown away by a drunkard—like a bauble to a beggar! . . ." And he turned away darkly, with a dangerous flush, but met De Roquemort's rapier-like glance and instantly collected himself. As the soldier of fortune nodded curtly, the Prince's expression changed, and became impassive and cold—for he was shrewd enough.

And presently, arm in arm, the short, strong figure in immaculate modern flannels and the towering one in medieval mail swung into step as if with a common purpose, and passed out together through the marble archway. Their heels beat out a long tattoo down the vacant corridors, till it died away at last.

Norma shivered, as though a chill had gone through her heart. She had understood only too well what that royal gift conveyed without words. Like enough, before her eyes rose a weird picture she had already seen—the picture of the satyr in the ivory chair, with his smoldering eyes of flame. . . .

"Send it back!" she said, shuddering. "I shall dream that I can hear that monster coming for me in the dark! . . ." Her voice quivered and broke. "Oh, Alan—take me away from here—anywhere—only take me away, before it is too late! But first send that gleaming, beautiful, evil thing back! . . ."

The Honorable Robert Piers Croydon, Viscount Chalmes, who was listening intently, bit his lips till the blood came; he had been overlooked, ignored; but his lordship was oddly silent. He had always his unforgetable code of a gentleman, and he held to his code without a sign.

As for me, my pulse was racing at a mile a minute, for I had guessed which way the wind blew in a storm.

"Back it goes," said I, "to that devil who sent it—and by the last of the race of Jotunheim! I

shall be happy to go with him on that errand," and I beckoned to Ingulf, who, seeing that he was wanted, left his place by the door and saluted impassively.

"No—not you, Mr. Severn!" said Norma, turning pale. "Not *that!* You would go to your death!"

"I will go!" I repeated doggedly, and made a sign to Ingulf, who quietly picked up his great sword. And I stretched out my hand for the casket, but the Lady Phaïma had sprung up and waved me back imperiously.

"Nay," she said swiftly, "you are mad! . . . You would but throw your lives away. The King is like a mad beast when he is thwarted in his cups. You shall not go!" Her voice had sunk to a singular, thrilling whisper, but every word was distinctly audible:

"Hark to the Valkyrs calling!" she went on in her strained, hushed tones. "Do you hear the footfalls of the Jotuns coming nearer; tramp, tramp, tramp, until they shake the earth? . . . Look! Can you see that long, keen white sparkle in the sun? . . . One day, my lords and Jarls, you will see it too, perhaps, in this fair, unhappy land, that cries out to the frowning gods in Valhalla against the base-souled Butcher who rules his people with a red hand and a heart of stone!"

Her face altered and the look of prophecy faded away abruptly. In spite of myself, I was staring through the window, half expecting to see some

strange sight conjured up out of nowhere by her wild words. But there was nothing but the white, almost deserted streets, asleep in the blazing sunlight.

"What do you mean?" I said amazed.

"That one day, Jarl, strong arms may strike home at last, and yours with them! You can wait. Let a woman's wit outmatch the King's—as a woman has ever been his undoing. Aye," she went on, "best for this pretty, wicked plaything to go back now to that royal drunkard, ere the storm bursts! I will be your messenger—a woman. He dare not harm a Princess of Valkyria!"

And before any one could detain her she had snatched up the crown of Valkyria and was gone.

She was right, after all, and we let her go. But as she went, Ingulf glided out like a shadow behind her. My astonishment and curiosity changed to a grim smile of amusement, as I thought of the mad pranks that Fate was playing with us all!

What befell in that interview with the royal pagan sitting in his great hall, the Princess Phaïma never described. But men told with awe and wonder in their tones, how a white vision of wrath, attended by a grim Berserker with a great glittering sword, had burst in upon the King as he sat in his banquet hall, drinking long and deep with all of his mead-sodden, half tipsy crew of courtiers; and how that indignant vision had read him such a homily of biting, scornful ridicule and bitter wit as sobered him

somewhat, and made all his stout henchmen chuckle into their flagons; while the tall Berserk had leaned on his long, two-handed sword and laughed. And how the Red King smote the nearest chuckler senseless with a blow of his great paw, and would have boxed the lady's pretty ears, in his fury, had she not whipped out a wicked little sharp dagger under the royal nose, and then walked out of the hall before those amazed and shaken revelers could recover from their stupefaction. And in truth, none of that awed company cared to dispute the lady's way with that grim Viking who stalked at her heels, so fierce were the stranger's eyes as he had turned on them all like a wolf at bay—ere he had left them to their thirsty thoughts, and was gone! And how the Lady Phaïma had maliciously dropped the royal crown of Valkyria into a brimming mead-tun they had broached in the banquet hall, where it lay sparkling at the bottom of the clear brown mead for all men to see.

Whereat the Red King laughed a great laugh, and set to work to drink up that ill-omened cask of mead himself, to its intoxicating, sweet brown lees; and men averred that he got most royally drunk about it. But drunk or sober, it did not turn him from his purpose, as Norma found out in the end. . . .

After that, events flew fast. There came a gorgeous seneschal with a golden baton, whose daz-

zling, parti-colored hose and jerkin would have put to the blush the modern French scenic posters of the *Moulin Rouge*. A barbaric blaze of colors almost shrieked from him; he was all purple and red and gold, but there the comparison ended. The man was enormously obese—a pallid, yellow, quivering mass of unhealthy human flesh, rocking and teetering upon alarmingly feeble legs that seemed to bow in grotesque denial under all that gluttonous weight, as though they mutely disapproved of carrying it. Planting himself pompously in front of the Doctor and flourishing his glittering gilded staff under old Eric's huge hawk nose, while he rocked to and fro on his unstable nether limbs, that seneschal gurgled out a stream of words. In brief, King Fágu honored the foreign Jarls by desiring them to sit to meat with him straightway at the royal board.

There was no choice but to obey. And Eric sent back this bold and politic reply: He, Eric the Viking, and his friends and fellow adventurers, Raoul of Gascony, Ingulf the Wanderer, and the Thane of Croydon, with Captain Alan the Berserker (etc., etc.), had sat to meat with other great Kings ere now; and so would not fear to sit at the board of this King.

"The lion and the mastiff's breed," quoth Eric, "could sup well enough in peace out of the same platter; for they had ever fed best the jackals and the ravens."

The somewhat overawed seneschal went back with that message and delivered it, stammering, to the Butcher; but men said the King only laughed a royal laugh.

And taking half a dozen of El Zanek's wild-looking Arabs for a retinue, we went, with Prince Hâkon and his men-at-arms to keep us company.

Into the dim, huge hall we went where King Fágu sat drinking a great beaker of heady wine with his mailed henchmen; and sat ourselves down at the lowest row of benches. Beyond the dais where the King sat, I could make out the dim outlines of the tall ivory throne at the far end of the hall; and behind it an alcove shut off by heavy crimson curtains glimmering in the weird reflected glare of the street-lights that were beginning to blaze up below in the main square of Valkyria.

As we sat down, several of the remarkably handsome and shapely slave-girls, who were naked to the waist, for they wore only short leopard-skin kirtles falling to the knee, began to set aflame the fan-shaped stone chandeliers with their flickering rush-lights, and I saw the King lean over and beckon to us from the dais.

"Step hither, noble Jarls," he cried as we advanced, "and drink a cup of this good red wine! Fear not—'tis as safe as a girl's lips! . . . or safer, like enow! . . 'Twas never the Butcher's creed to use aught but cold steel! . . ." And he laughed at his grim jest.

"Thanks, Sir King," quoth Eric, coolly taking up the cup with both hands and looking him hard in the eyes, ere he drank, "but that is a game two can play!"

"By Thor's hammer, well said, Sir Viking!" and the King swore a great oath. "Ye are men of the true mastiff breed! Aye, that was a gallant message you sent some while agone by this overweighted seneschal of mine. Yet he would have made it out black treason, an' I had lent a ready ear to his fool's counsel," and he laughed royally.

Eric bowed low with a ready grace.

"A kingly rede and worthy of the Lion of Valkyria!" he said; and I thought: "What a king that man might have been after all under a nobler star!" And we sat down at the royal board and began to eat the savory venison pasties which the slaves had set before us at a sign from the King; washing the food down with the red wine, for the mead was too sweet and sickening.

But two things I marked; first, that the King's grim, silent body-servant standing behind his settle, who was our old acquaintance, Agi the bowman, was watching us narrowly and never took his fierce eyes off our faces; and second, that as the wine went round, King Fágu drank deeper than we liked to see.

"By the sword of Odin!" quoth the King, thawed visibly by the mellow wine, "ye are men of some wit, 'tis plain. Hark you, Jarl, outlander as you are, there is a path by which a man might climb to

high honor in this fair land if he be so minded—the path that many a fair and noble lady of Valkyria would give her all to travel till the end of her days. Yet how if a fair foreigner's starry face haunts my dreams! How if I am minded to make you and yours great lords of my kingdom?" and he leaned over and stared at Eric meaningly.

But Eric looked straight into the Jotun's eyes.

"Sir King," he said coldly, "you are mad! The thing you desire can never be. Beware, O King, of a woman's beauty—for blood will run like water, as of old, wherever that fatal star glows red! . . . Let dreams bide, . . . ere it be yours!"

The Jotun laughed a terrible laugh. "Have a care, Wanderer!" he said, "or the Lion may show his teeth! . . . I say it shall be! Aye," he added, "how if I send swift for the fair Lady Norma and bid her choose now—in this room! . . . How can ye prevent it?"

A frozen silence fell. "So it has come at last!" I thought, drawing my revolver deliberately.

But the Red King never stirred from his seat, while I weighed the chances swiftly . . . why not cut the knot of Norma's fears forever? . . . and my grip closed convulsively on the revolver-butt. . . . But I could not bring myself to murder him where he sat.

Sometimes, when I think of all the misery and human lives it might have saved, I have regretted afterward that I did not pitilessly put an end to his

red career in time, with a bullet through his brave, ruthless heart.

And up leaped Raoul de Roquemort, his eyes blazing.

"Death of my blood! . . ." he cried. "King, you will go too far! Think you that I and these men will stand idle and see the Lady Norma made the plaything of a barbarian—King though you be?"

"Barbarian!" said King Fágu, livid with fury. "Bridle that cursed tongue of yours, Jarl! Down, men! This is my affair, not yours. . . . Back!" for he had caught the ominous flash of steel round the board, and with the cool mastery of men for which he was remarkable—it had made him the greatest man in the kingdom—he quelled their rising uproar with a contemptuous, half blood-curdling laugh.

Unawed, he had the singular presence of mind to take up the tall tankard by his elbow and drain it without once looking round; he was well aware that it was the one way to allow hot blood time to cool. But his hand shook as he set it down—empty!

"Enough!" he said, frowning. "We will let the Lady Norma choose at another time. . . . Drink! O Wanderers, . . . and go in peace! . . ." And he set us the example by drinking deep, while I sat fascinated, watching him drain cup after cup of the strong red wine and brown, narcotic mead till his face flushed dark red, and I thought no liv-

ing man could sit upright and hold all of that drenching flood of liquor which I had seen poured down the Jotun's throat. The scene was not without a grim pathos of its own.

"Drink! . . ." he muttered thickly, reeling up unsteadily and snatching a golden goblet from a slave. "Drink deep, O Wanderers—ere it is too late! . . Be merry while you may, for to-day flies swift, and to-morrow is yet unborn! . . . Dimly I hear the far-off clash of steel come ringing nearer and nearer—and hear the Valkyries calling to me from the halls of Odin! . . Away! . . . the gates of the Caverns of Sleep yawn wide! . . . Valhalla awaits us all . . . Fare-ye-well!"

He drained the huge goblet to the dregs, and lurched forward, reeling across the banquet board with a dull crash. As he lay stupefied amid the scattered litter of the feast, the armed guards silently closed around the King in a protecting circle of steel—half raising their glittering axes; but it was done mechanically, as if they were well accustomed to such scenes.

At once, four colossal negro slaves appeared carrying a gorgeous stretcher upon which they gently lifted the drunken form of their master and bore him impassively away within the curtained alcove behind the dais, where a great couch of ivory and gold, strewn with leopard skins, loomed dimly behind the crimson curtains.

"The Butcher is drunk as ever!" quoth a short,

red-nosed man in a jerkin of many hues, staggering tipsily to his feet and wagging his bullet head accusingly, amid a general burst of laughter: "Gods! . . . how he did pour the good red wine down that great throat of his . . . as if he could find no bottom!"

"Peace! O Loki the Fool!" the Captain of the Guard broke in sternly, "yap not at a better drunkard than thyself, like a cross-bred cur at his master's heels! An' thou wert by mischance a King, I'll warrant thee that we should see a swifter conclusion to the feast, and discover thee rolling among the wine-lees under the board—ere it was properly begun!"

But the red-nosed man had buried his face deep in a great tankard of mead. He emptied it with one long thirsty gurgle, ere he looked around.

"And thou—Azir the Politician!" quoth he, "if thou wert King, we should see neither feast nor flagon—aye naught save a black blight of priests, mumming in the banquet halls from sunrise till eventide!"

The shaft flew home, for the soldier was sheepishly silent. Prince Hâkon whispered carelessly:

"'Tis only the court Fool . . a droll knave he is . . . with a biting tongue. Come with me. . . . When the lion is asleep, the jackals make merry at the feast!"

And mechanically we followed the Prince, who

pushed his way unceremoniously past that thirsty throng of feasters. They had finished gorging themselves, and were setting to work at last to get mellow drunk.

Five minutes more and we were out in the white, silent courtyard, under the dark-blue tropic sky; ablaze with a million haunting stars. Gladly I leaned down over the quiet, starlit fountain and laved my throbbing temples with the cold, clear running water, and listened to its cool splash in the marble basins.

So suddenly that it startled me, a tall form stepped out of the shadows and clawed at De Roquemort's arm; and I caught the flashing glitter from the whites of his eyes, under his long white *haik*. It was the ex-slaver—El Zanek, the Arab.

"Ha! my bold little *Giaour!*" he said in guttural Arabic, "is it you? We grow tired of this waiting in the dark! . . . When will we pick the lock of this white town to which men have lost the key? When will the blood-rain begin falling? When will it be, Pasha?"

I heard the Marquis mutter briefly:

"Be patient, you old hyena! The blood-fever is in your veins again; see that you cool it well! By Mahomed's beard and hair!—it will come . . . and we shall see these yellow sluggards pouring out of their hives like a swarm of wasps. . . . Go back to the guns."

"Allah is merciful!" said the Arab. "We can wait." And he vanished silently as he came. We too went back unchallenged to our quarters and slept for many hours—the restless sleep of those over whom the shadow of fate hovers intangibly.

CHAPTER XIX

THE JOTUN'S TREASURE

HOURS in all our great adventures in the world race into our lives and out, like swirling dead leaves of time, blown away and forgotten. . . . As I sat up with a start, the hot African sun was shining full in my face from the tall, narrow windows of that room; and Sherry was standing over my couch, fully dressed and booted, and with a pair of big revolvers, as usual, strapped around his waist.

"Get up, old fellow," he adjured. "The Prince is waiting in the ante-room, you know, with the ladies. He has promised to show them a rare sight —a sort of Bluebeard's Chamber, from what I gather, with all the loot those old sea-rovers picked up, hundreds of years ago, in their voyage down the Mediterranean, and their raids on the Roman provinces in Africa. By Jove! Alan, it will be a sight no Englishman has ever seen before!"

"'Ware goblin gold, my lad!" I put in skeptically, pulling on my boots, in a brown study. "Never leap a blind fence in the dark. . . . And now tell me, why does Prince Hâkon tempt a hungry pack of

foreign wolves like us with the Jotun's hoard of his ancestors?"

He laughed significantly.

"Some fine day, Alan, hell will break loose in Valkyria! Already, the people murmur at the Red King's cruelty. The Prince has his own motives, I fancy. He is the popular idol—half the army would follow him, if he turns crusty on his respected uncle, and small blame to him. My blood boils at that devil's work. I have seen women that were broken by the lash, and twisted things that once were men, crawling in the streets. For my part, I say let us cast in our lot with the Prince. He is a gallant gentleman, if ever I saw one."

"And shrewd enough to know that white men and yellow men fight for gold," I remarked cynically. "Sovereigns to shillings, we get what Englishmen gave to the 'King of Norroway'—six feet of alien soil. Well, as these Arabs say, 'Kismet! what is written is written!' . . . As for the Prince, I am his man—gold or no gold. And now for Bluebeard's Chamber."

And having breakfasted perfunctorily during this mad conversation, we sauntered with the Doctor into the ante-room where the Prince was waiting for us with De Roquemort and my Lord Chalmes—the latter, as usual, lazily bantering with the women, in a clique apart.

Hâkon watched us with a shadowy smile.

"Ha! my lords," he said, "so you come too?

Gold is a most mighty magnet in all lands, it seems! By the bones of the dead!—you shall have it, my noble friends! Aye, you shall open the Jotun's treasury and behold the ransom of kings!—the loot their keen blades and grim hands tore from the great temples and plundered cities of the past. . . . It lies here under your feet, as it has lain for twenty generations—useless to your world . . . but waiting for bold hearts to win it back! . . to win it . . and re-scatter it . . . once again!"

"All very pretty, Prince," I broke in. "But how are we going to get it—if you don't mind?"

"Earn it!" was the laconic reply. He stirred his sword so that the steel clanged faintly upon the marble bench where he had lounged.

"You have guessed the way. What say you, Jarls—will you strike home with me at last?"

The Marquis threw in suddenly: "His Imperial Highness will revolt and seize the throne." He added in a swift aside, "I will answer for these gentlemen, my Lord Prince. You shall be master of the palace in a day. . . . And for the rest——"

"And King Fágu the Red?" I asked curiously.

Prince Hâkon said, cold as an icicle: "The Butcher has lived long enough. One boon he shall have—to die fighting, but by another hand than mine. He is my uncle . . ." He paused and pointed to Ingulf, and a strange smile swept over his face. "That is the man to fight him."

"He is the man, Prince," I said quietly. "But

a word of advice. Make no mistake and let the Red King slip through your fingers, or you will never sit on the throne of your fathers. And now—in case of accidents, you know—the treasure? . . . The hunter must pay the hounds, my lord."

We walked in silence down the room to where the women were jesting gaily with his handsome half-sister, all unwitting the grim compact just made; and listening amused to one of Chalmes' unique drawing-room catastrophies, in his lordship's best Piccadilly drawl. He had played "back" for Raoul de Roquemort! And as I looked at their gay, unconscious faces, I wondered if any of them would ever see civilization again, if our plans miscarried by a hair.

Hâkon said: "Be it how you will. But let us be swift about it, Jarls. Come with me." I nodded stiffly.

He beckoned and passed out. We all followed in his wake, De Roquemort first, down the quiet corridors and through a seemingly endless labyrinth of gloomy passages and empty courts. The palace seemed asleep. . . . Presently the ladies uttered exclamations of dismay. We had come into some disused wing of the great main keep, crumbling into semi-decay; where the dust lay thick upon the gray, ancient stone walls and broken, somber stairways that were taking us, evidently, to the lower level of the streets.

As the light faded out, I felt a woman's hand slip

tensely under my arm—it was Norma. She had left Lord Chalmes to himself; and we went on tacitly together without speaking, following the tall shape of Prince Hâkon, who had turned into another vaulted passage and pulled up at last at a grim, yawning archway that ended in a flight of stone steps leading downward into a black mystery below.

He said briefly to De Roquemort: "Light your lamp, Jarl," and suddenly the petrol torch flared up in the gloom and revealed the steps plainly.

"'Ware steps!" I warned Alline, who had arrived breathless. "Steady, my lady!"

The American girl laughed hysterically.

"I'm all agog," she said, "to see what is in Bluebeard's room! But I admit I'm afraid to look." The Marquis was gallantly assisting the handsome Yankee widow down the steps. The Doctor followed, looking like some prehistoric ape-man in the distorted light. Alline tried to laugh. "It's the 'curse of curiosity,' Mr. Severn, that makes people discover things!"

There was a wry smile on his lordship's features as Norma, supported by my arm thrown round her waist, went pluckily down the stone stair, leaving him to follow disconsolately with his torch, like an unwilling lamp-bearer to that curious pageant of mystery, avarice and love. Ingulf came last, and glancing back again, I saw the light flash from the great, naked sword in his hand.

Presently we had reached the foot of the stair.

We were in a vaulted, dim passageway underground, and cut transversely by two narrow openings leading to right and left. "We are under the palace, my lords," said Hâkon. His voice sounded sepulchral. "One of those cuttings leads out to the river embankment; the other comes out into the central courtyard near the wall."

The passage went straight ahead for something like fifty feet, and ended in a great, grim-looking iron door set flush into the solid gray wall of stone.

"The key—my Lord Prince!" De Roquemort said with a catch in his voice; "the key of that door?"

"Aye—hold the light closer, Jarl!"

In a minute, I heard the iron bar grate back in its rusty socket. I saw the heavy door swing outward, as Hâkon heaved on the huge, iron handle; and we crowded inside. We stood in what was evidently a stone mausoleum eighteen or twenty feet square. In several iron sockets on the wall were jammed partially burned torches of some resinous yellow wood which flared up brightly when we had set them alight to get a better view. Then we stared amazed at what we saw.

"The devil!" Sherry gasped out. "It is Bluebeard himself!" He pointed to the still figure of a man in rusty armor, seated in a sort of stone armchair with the weird face and empty eye-sockets staring straight at us. The women screamed and recoiled at the sight. But Prince Hâkon never stirred.

Then I saw that the man was dead—a mummy; and went up to him.

In life he must have been a very tall man, well above seven feet; and even death had not quite deprived him of a certain dark dignity and commanding, martial air that sat upon his dead brows. He was clad in rusted and tarnished steel harness with a winged helm on his head like the pictures of the old Viking gods; and across the knees of the silent, mailed form there lay a long, straight sword, whose double edges, once bright and keen, had long ago been eaten away and dulled by the corroding film of rust.

The face was that of a man of sixty or past, with iron-gray hair and a long drooping gray mustache; but its chief characteristic was the remarkably heavy jaw—it was the jaw of a Roman general or a born fighter. Whoever had set that dead man there had known something of that lost art of the Egyptians; for the mummy was still in a fair state of preservation, and over it hung the faint, unmistakable odor of bitumen. The figure in the narrow stone chair faced towards the door—it was propped up by the back and arms of the chair; and the illusion was startlingly real, for one yellow, claw-like hand had fallen as though menacingly on the cross-hilt of the rusty sword.

The old scientist pulled himself together first. He was blinking appallingly at the gray wall behind the stone seat, where I could see cut into the rock

as if by some sharp-pointed instrument a number of wavering lines of queer writing which I could not make out.

"Runes!—by the sword of Odin!" he squeaked. "As I live, it is the Saga of Ingulf!" And he actually began to read aloud slowly from the writing on that hoar-stained wall as easily as you may read this printed page. . . . "Hark to the dead man's Saga!" he said, "the Viking's death-song—

"Nor holm nor hearth nor land
Fell to my empty hand —
Naught save this rusty brand;
Sea-thief and Wanderer:
Homeless and landless I
Saw the wild surf boil high
As the gray coast we scanned
Long days without measure,
Nor Death reck nor rue.
Ingulf the Tall hight I,
Ingulf the black-haired Skald
Pirate and Bareserk called;
Ingulf the King I died
Here in this chamber.
Ingulf his name must be
Who wins this Treasure:
DEAD MEN SAY TRUE."

I stared at the features of the dead sea-rover, and at the impenetrable mask of Ingulf, who stood gazing into his dead face like one who had lost the power of speech; and it seemed to me that I could

see a shadowy, far-off, yet familiar likeness between the two. Was Ingulf his living reincarnation? My brain staggered with the appalling puzzle of it all.

Speechlessly, as if he saw some ghost of his own past rise up mockingly from behind a wall of lost memories, Ingulf stood peering fascinated at the mailed figure that seemed to watch him silently from its inscrutable, empty eyes. Great drops of sweat broke out on his forehead. He passed one hand with a gesture of dull anguish over his face. As if rooted to the floor, I stared at him, wordless. Over and over the question was mechanically repeating itself in my brain: was he the dead Viking's lineal descendant? The Doctor was gabbling off jerkily something about his abominably futile runes. He seemed to regard them as of enormous importance; they were his odd, warped, crazy little graven gods. I didn't care a farthing dip about them. I was mentally groping out of the dark . . . WAS INGULF THE RIGHTFUL KING OF VALKYRIA? Then Cecil Rhodes' dream of destiny would turn real! Like a mist of yellow flame, the torchlight flared up suddenly and illumined the whole strange scene; and through it I had a momentary flash of Norma's pale face, with her eyes set in it like jewels; and a vision of the doors of the House of Raylescroft, opening slowly—at last!

But if it was true after all, why was Ingulf so silent? Why had Phaïma and Hâkon and the Red

King and all the rest of them utterly failed to recognize him? Or was that whole dark skein of tangled lives only some mad, weird web of chance, a wild conjecture—the mere coincidence of a name? Out of the queer silence that had fallen over us all, like a spell, I heard an amazed voice, choked up as if cracked, saying disconnectedly: "The treasure! . . ."

"The treasure!" echoed De Roquemort. "Where is the treasure?" His jaw dropped, as he stared round the room. "Death of my life, *camarades!*" he roared. "The room is empty!" It was the truth. Save for ourselves and the mummy in the stone seat, and a pile of unburned fagots in a corner, there was nothing else.

"Open the iron door, Jarls—in the wall!" said Hâkon.

And then I perceived what none of us had noticed at first—a narrow iron door in the wall behind the dead man, set in level with the masonry. The damp and rust of centuries had corroded the iron till it had turned to almost the color of the stone, on which account we had overlooked it. The door was not locked. It opened into a kind of oblong alcove, about fifteen feet long and ten feet across.

I could make out the dull sheen and flash of jeweled armor hung on the wall, and golden ornaments of every description, and long rows of metal bars piled up almost to the roof. They were stacked like stovewood against the gray rock. To

describe what was in that room would read like an inventory of the contents of some marvelous treasure-chamber in one of the great metropolitan museums of the world's capitals; or perhaps of some equally priceless collection in the palace of a multi-millionaire.

First of all, there were four great golden basins, that must have weighed twenty or thirty pounds apiece; and they might have come out of some royal palace of the Cæsars, for all that I know. One of them was beautifully and quaintly carved with the relief of a banquet scene in a noble hall—apparently a king's palace; but we forgot the beauty of the designs when we looked in the basins. Inside were dozens of ancient gold cups literally crusted with gems that flashed and glittered as we shook the dust from them, one by one, and held them up to the light. Some of them bore inscriptions which the Doctor pronounced to be Phœnician; others were inscribed in Arabic, and several in Latin. Besides the goblets, there were dozens of gem-crusted daggers and jeweled collars, set with great sapphires and rubies, and with hundreds of small diamonds—hardly any stones that were under a karat, and a good many that would weigh four or five karats or over, all of the first water. There were a few suits of beautiful steel and brass armor all inlaid with gold; and five or six separate steel cuirasses of the finest workmanship, which once might have glittered upon the stalwart Centurions of

Heraclian, when the Roman legionaries had come sweeping down in their long, brave, emotionless line, in the African sun, on the queenly cities of the blue midland sea . . . all in the long ago! Neither the Carthaginians nor the Romans would ever arise again to claim them from their Viking plunderers, who were also dead and forgotten.

Flung carelessly on the top of all that incredible heap of loot were half a dozen linked sword-belts, in which jewels flashed; and scores of massive gold armlets and anklets; two great altar-cloths that shone with a snaky brilliance wherever the light struck their heavy folds. They were made of pure hammered gold, cunningly woven with flat links joined together almost as perfectly as the fabric of a cloth. Then we came to the metal bars piled up in rows. There were at a rough estimate about three hundred and fifty ingots that weighed anywhere from eight up to fifteen pounds each; but whether they had been mined in the country, or represented the melted loot of some sacked city of the old world, it was impossible to know. Nobody cared a particle. They were there, before our eyes —more than a ton of gold! And the value of them, with the jewels, was literally staggering! How many millions lay heaped up in that room, I didn't know then. I was dazed. I knew that we had found an enormous treasure—one of the world's great treasures. Drake nor Morgan, who had

sacked the golden cities of the Spanish Main, had never got such a treasure at one blow!

Cortez and the old Conquistadores of Spain had left a red blot in history for such another. And even the dark heart of Africa had never given up anything like it. If we could get it through to the coast! . . . Somebody began to quote monotonously—

> "Gold! Gold! Gold! Gold!
> Bright and yellow, hard and cold,
> Molten, graven, hammered and rolled;
> Price of many a crime untold:
> Gold! Gold! Gold! Gold!"

"We are all millionaires!" muttered the voice of De Roquemort. "We have got the hoard of the Jotuns!"

Prince Hâkon put in dryly: "My lords, we will need to prove that with cold steel. Come, we are losing time." He passed out abruptly, with the Marquis at his heels. Ingulf glided out after them.

Their footsteps receded along the passage. The others were going away, but I stood quite still, Norma clung fast to my arm. Lord Chalmes watched us absently. He coughed. . . . The ex-professor, lingering absorbed, uttered an exclamation and held up a beautiful and ancient bronze urn, apparently of Phœnician workmanship, from which

he poured forth a golden stream of rings and brooches that sparkled with jewels.

"Look!" droned the Doctor; "the old story—the wares of Tyre and Sidon!—symbols of human nature. Always the same! I wonder what fair hands and white throats those costly playthings once shone upon in the Golden Age?" As he poured them out in his hand, a great ruby that glowed like a red star leaped from that gleaming flood and came spinning across the floor.

Strangely enough, it spun to Norma's feet like an omen. I had an overpowering impulse and read the same thought in her eyes. And I picked up the ring mechanically and slipped it upon her slim white finger, astounded to find that it fitted perfectly.

The Doctor's wrinkled face seemed to crack open suddenly. He had smiled. He gave us a piercing, long look out of his faded, wise old eyes, peering over the enormous steel-rimmed spectacles. Then he went away, nodding, nodding his big gray head.

CHAPTER XX

IN WHICH LORD CHALMES PASSES OUT

NORMA caught her breath swiftly, looking down fascinated at the gleaming stone on her finger. "Why, Alan, it is my birthstone!" she said breathlessly. "What have you done?"

And stung by his lordship's ironic eyes, I pointed to the glittering heap of treasure.

"I have found a way to climb to the star . . as I said that I would—one day! . . . Look, there is the golden ladder, Norma!" But her eyes remained fixed, as if hypnotized, upon the great, blazing ruby; she seemed chained there without the power of words. A vague, misty smile was breaking slowly over her face.

I was alarmed by the idea that she was going to cry. So wonderful a thing is a woman's final surrender. For I had guessed that almost instinctively. I said, very low, "It is your betrothal ring—remember! . . Wear it for a luckstone till we both . . ."

Lord Chalmes started as if he had been shot. He had understood and through his ashen-gray lips, he burst out chillingly—

"Severn, you're a d——d adventurer! I had expected this . . it won't succeed. This lady is my affianced wife. An arrangement, of course . . . and with her father's sanction. . . . Keep back—or as I live, I'll knock you down!"

I said to that, with my face just an inch from his chin, "Mark me, my lord, she's going to throw you over—and marry me." He looked at me incredulously, and shot a sharp stare at Norma's telltale features.

That seemed to stagger him. The broad yellow bar of light from the flickering oil lamp, which he had held closer, flamed across their faces. Norma's was white and startled; and as if in reply to an audible question, she made with her head the mute gesture of assent.

Norma did not speak. It was all like a pantomime in a play. The weird surroundings made up the "stage-setting"—the medieval room, the dead pirate in his rusty mail, and the heaps of gold.

He stepped back gravely. I watched his somber, pale face with a sort of strained fascination; and saw it abruptly change from mocking irony to a look that was a total blank—the queer, stunned look which creeps over a man's face who has renounced something out of his life, and folded back the page and put away the Book of Dreams at last upon some dusty shelf.

Long afterwards, that singular look upon his white, stunned face remained seared into my memory.

To me, in Valkyria and afterwards, Lord Chalmes was always a superior sort of personage—a very *Richard Cœur de Lion* of a man—a heroic figure; a thoroughbred, an aristocrat of the upper crust. And I can still remember my amazement at his wordless exit. He never looked back. He walked away inscrutably, without a word—recalling I think that he was a Peer and a gentleman, and true to his invincible code. I heard his footfalls going away, along the corridor, as though they were passing out of our lives. We were alone.

Norma came straight into my arms.

"He is gone, and I have given him up at last, Alan!" she said a minute after, looking back. "Once I used to try to make myself believe that I really loved him; but it was all a mistake—a terrible mistake! It was only the empty glitter of a Peerage—to be called 'My Lady!' . . . I knew it was a dreadful mistake, on the day I heard that you had gone away, in the pay of Cecil Rhodes. And I followed you to Rhodesia, hoping—that we might meet again——"

"At the parting of the ways! Thank God!" I said, and crushed her close in my arms. Breathlessly, she broke away and looked at me panic-stricken.

"Alan! They have all gone back without us. We shall miss them! Take me away. I am afraid of this place."

But I laughed and kissed her.

"They will be waiting for us at the stair," I said.

Norma shuddered.

"I am afraid," she quivered, "I cannot bear the empty eyes of that dead Thing—they frighten me! . . . I was sure, a moment ago, that I heard something creeping, creeping always nearer! . . . Take me back, I am afraid!"

Passing behind the figure in the big stone chair, I stooped, wrenching one of the blazing fagots from its iron socket on the wall.

They had all burned low—the room seemed to sway and blur, very oddly; to become weirdly dim and stifling, with the hot gust of men's breath, and to be full of long, quiet, flitting shadows like vague illusions of the unreal shapes and effigies of men. I started. *Was* it all illusion?

Behind me, a voice hissed:

"Be swift! . . . The girl——"

I was pinned fast, before I could wheel round in my tracks. Hands like steel clamps gripped my arms before I could so much as wink an eyelid. It was all horribly quick, like a stage trick of acrobatics.

The same voice said grimly: "Be silent, Jarl! A cry—and I drive the steel home!" I could see nobody at all; but I was aware of the presence of something that breathed very hard from behind me. I felt a dagger prick the back of my neck.

The lights at last flared up brilliantly all round me. And craning my head back with a convulsive,

reckless, hard wrench, like a mad animal in a trap, I discovered that I was looking up into the triumphant eyes of the King of Valkyria.

I stared round at the ring of fierce faces. I saw Agi the archer, and Azir, the tall guardsman; I saw the dark, evil features and wicked green orbs of the Arch Priest; and many another grim face I knew. But the King's chilling eyes, with a flash of comprehension, traveled past me to Norma, who stood with a stare of horror frozen on her face.

The Red King took his dagger from my throat.

"Take away his weapons," he commanded, pointing to my revolvers; and they took them away.

"And now, my fair Lady Norma," said the Red King, "you will bend to my will at last, for all your proud heart, or this man who is your lover—dies!" He fixed his eyes on me—eyes that seemed to glow like points of fire—and a shadow came into his face.

"Listen! my Lady," he said slowly, "one little word from you will send his soul winging to the gates of Hela! . . . To-night he lives and breathes—to-morrow the greensward may close over him forever! . . . Under the ground, with the night winds singing across his grave—who will remember that he was once a man? . . And yet, O Lady, because you have loved this man, I would see him spared if it may be so. Myself, I do not condemn the Jarl who stands there, your confessed lover, nor doom a brave man who has but followed the star of Fate

which the gods have set aglow! . . You are his judge, O Lady. Be merciful or be heartless; sentence him, or set him free. He lives or dies, as you will it—but you shall be a queen—Queen of Valkyria!

He paused, and seemed to listen intently, as if for some expected signal; but before Norma could speak, he made a swift, imperious gesture. "Wait!" he said, "before you choose. There is a better reason, Lady, why you should be Queen." With an altered face, he had drawn himself up royally; and, at that moment at least, he looked to be every inch a king.

"From Valhalla," he said quietly, "the gods call to me through your voice. Perhaps I have been a drunkard and a reveler—but never a dullard nor a coward. As you see this fair city of Valkyria, so I and mine have made it; as you see me, the King, so the gods have willed it! Men have called me 'the Butcher,' but only by a hand of iron is it possible to hold a throne without an heir . . . I have been childless. . . . So the Alruna foretold ere she died. . . . Had it been different, my Lady, I had been a King indeed! But no son of mine has ever brought a smile of joy to my lips," he went on rather sadly; "and for me the bells that peal out so gladly for a gallant heir have never rung."

He was silent for a long minute. Amazed and spellbound, I listened, watching the dawning struggle that was breaking over Norma's vivid face, from

which the color had died out, leaving it dead-white and quivering, as if torn with conflicting thoughts.

"But always," he went on in a changed voice, "was graven in my memory the Alruna's saying: 'Only by mating with a Queen of an alien race shall the spell be broken and the Fates unchained!' And then you came, and I understood! There is no other way, Lady Norma—and I love you! Waking or dreaming, your face haunts me, and I hear the golden echoes of your voice! Aye, with you, on my regenerated throne, life shall begin anew for me! . . . I will cast off the poor husks and shreds of that old, ignoble life of mine and rule this fair land like a King—in truth, methinks almost like a god!"

Norma shrank back terrified.

"Give me time!" she wavered, trembling. "Give me time, O King! I cannot answer you so soon—wait!"

"Nay, it must be now!" the King broke in coldly, and again he paused and seemed to listen intently for something. "Lady, it must be, and this man's life stands in my way. Tempt me no more; I am but a man, although I be a King!"

Norma turned on me a quivering, tortured look.

I burst out: "I am ready to die——"

"I am sorry for you, Lady," said the King. "But for the peace of the after years, two masters none may serve—not even in memory! Remember that all men's eyes are ever turned upon a Queen,

and drops of poison breed fast on telltale tongues. The breath of slander——"

"How dare you, sir!" she said indignantly.

He checked himself instantly at the vision of her pale, contemptuous face and flashing eyes.

"I dare," he said slowly, "because I am a King. Had I cared but to find a new mistress, I had followed my old bent and slain the man first, then consoled the lady afterward! Be wise, my Lady! Renounce him now—and I can be generous! Cleave to him, and his death is in it. . . . Choose!"

Norma faltered out, shuddering:

"Alan! . . . I cannot——" She had turned pale as death, and the tears were shining in her eyes. Watching her face, the King made a swift sign to the guards. I went suddenly rigid all over.

As they stepped back, lacking the space to swing a sword, there was a long shriek from Norma that rang through the room and went echoing up the corridor. But no answering voice came back; only the echoes of that scream, that rose and died away. What had happened? Had they all gone away without us? Had we never been *missed?* Suddenly my blood ran cold, and, for a hideous moment, I nearly lost my grip on myself.

But amazingly enough, I laughed, and its grim unexpectedness produced a singular effect on the King and all his wondering henchmen; it impressed and startled them. I read instinctively in their staring faces the uneasy premonition of peril—some

ghost of fear. My wits were working swiftly. In another instant, I comprehended what it was they feared.

"King, the play is played out!" I said grimly, "that cry, before a minute is past, will bring down on you such a hell-blast of death as that priestly cur of yours there can tell you best," and I saw the priest quail and blanch as I said it.

"I have heard that the King of Valkyria was a brave and able soldier, but I have never heard that he was a fool. Draw off your men, Lord King, but be quick if you would begone alive! Let the girl go; I will do what I can to check the storm, ere it breaks!" He started, and I saw fear creep into his eyes.

I watched him while hope leapt up in my heart. "Hush! Be brave!" I said to Norma swiftly. "Help is near enough. Raoul de Roquemort will come back——"

"You are mad, Jarl!" quoth the King, divining in my face and in Norma's swift, involuntary glance toward the door the meaning of my words; while he stayed the guards with a rapid gesture. "No help will ever come from your friends. Hark! . . ."

Like an echo, as the words left his lips, a distant fusillade of revolver shots rang out from far up the passage at the stair—followed instantly by a hollow yell of triumph that burst from many voices, and then by a continuous roll of firing—broken by the faint, shivering clash of steel.

The effect of these sounds upon the men in the room was almost galvanic. Their grim features lit up with a fierce joy, and a dozen swords leapt out.

Over the swarthy face of Azir the soldier flashed a wolfish smile of triumph as he listened.

"The trap is sprung, King!" grated the guardsman, striding swiftly to the door and back, while the Red King never moved. "We have them!—by the gods in Valhalla, they are ours! . . . Swift! Sir King, slay this foreign wolf and take the girl now by force—the rest are caught 'twixt both ends of the trap, even as thou had'st expected. Aye, let our gallant comrades drive them back here on our blades—to die!"

As if in a lightning glare of revelation, I read the truth in their faces. I saw revealed in its nakedness of evil that deadly snare conceived and carried out by the master-brain of the King who would regenerate his throne! The Red King had struck to save his kingdom, and struck home. What a captain the man was after all! He had brilliantly thrown his guards upon us from both directions, confident that he would crush us between the wheels. Would he win?

The question flashed into my brain, but hopelessly, for I was looking death in the eyes. I saw the guardsman spin around and draw his sword, while he waited for the King's nod, ere he struck. I saw the frightful struggle of indecision that was

mirrored in every detail upon Norma's tortured, quivering face—saw the Red King watching her intently from his eyes that glowed like two live coals of fire. I saw all that distinctly and all in a flash of time.

"Choose!" the King echoed, "which shall it be—the Queen—or the King's mistress? . . ." As he spoke, another roll of firing came down the corridor, and with an almost superhuman access of strength and vigor, I wrenched myself free from the hands that held me, and struck him a fearful blow in the face.

"You hound!" I grated, and struck once more.

He went staggering back, but the sheer bulk of the man kept him afoot. His face was convulsed with fury, and an angry white blotch showed livid upon the dark, florid skin, as the guards dragged me down.

The King pointed at me.

"Kill him!"

"Oh, no, no!—let him go free!" Norma burst out appealingly, turning pale at the flash of the bare steel. "Release him!—and—I will wed you, O King!"

But the words came too late. The sword of Azir had swung up. I was hemmed in at last, and powerless, and I watched the glittering blade flash through the air—and fall aimlessly from his nerveless hand. There was a shot from the door. My would-be murderer spun right-about-face, reeled, and coughed a

crimson clot of blood from his lungs, while he pointed a shaking finger at a figure that stood in the threshold. Suddenly he collapsed in his tracks.

"De Roquemort! . . ." I tried to gasp. There was a blinding haze over my eyes. But the man in the door was not Raoul de Roquemort, but one I little expected to make that heroic sacrifice for me. Lord Chalmes came in the room coolly, almost lazily; he had evidently heard all that passed. But his face was hard-set as a marble god's. He didn't speak. He began firing with frightful, paralyzing precision into a room where men reeled and staggered and struck blindly at that shadowy avenging figure through a choking canopy of acrid, swirling gray smoke. I groped for the sword of Azir and found it in a pool of warm blood and my hand touched a face on the floor. It was Norma's face. She had fainted, mercifully enough, across the stiffening corpse of the soldier.

I arose and laid about me furiously with the sword. It was a heavy weapon, I remember, and I was exceedingly clumsy in its use. Faces staggered past me in the smoke, and I struck at them with a mad lust of battle surging up through the thin veneer of all my civilized ancestors of a thousand years. I would hold that one spot against them all—and I did it! The firing in the room ceased. I felt a stream of blood trickling down my arm, and began to wonder.

The smoke cleared away. My senses seemed to reel, as I stared absently at the sight that was un-

folded. *The Red King was gone!* In that room three men were left on their feet; the others were dead or had broken out of the death-trap. I was one and Lord Chalmes was one, but he stood reeling from side to side, very slowly, while the blood dripped from both his sleeves, down in red gussets to the floor.

He seemed to be a gory mass of wounds; his pistols were empty and useless. The third man was the Black Priest. He was unhurt, and I saw him leap at Lord Chalmes like a tiger, with a long sword in his hand, and strike. But as he sprang, with a last, wavering effort—for I was strangely weak and dizzy—I hurled the heavy sword at him, hilt first.

Dimly, as in a dream of some ghastly nightmare, I saw it strike him between the shoulder-blades and divert his arm, as he cut fiercely at Chalmes. But the blow fell glancing on the Peer's defenseless head, and he dropped like a log, and lay very white and still.

My brain was whirling round madly. I saw Lord Chalmes falling, and the thought came to me sadly enough:

"There fell a gallant gentleman of England!"

I saw the Arch Priest turn and glide through the door, and heard a clatter of footsteps, a volley of oaths in homely, familiar Anglo-Saxon; saw vaguely a group of faces, but whether of friends or foes or phantoms, I did not know. Then everything turned black.

PART FIFTH

HEARTS OF OAK

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST CHARGE OF THE GUARDS

I AWOKE . . . and the first face that I can remember seeing was Norma's, bending over me with her wonderful smile like the light breaking on a rippled pool. I gazed back a little vaguely into her eyes. The glow of the sunset was shining through the tall, embrasured window above me upon her face; very much as I had seen it shining upon her face before, but it seemed years before, and in a place I had almost forgotten: in the House of Raylescroft—the big gray House on the Hill. I sat up with a queer weakness and felt of the bandages on my head and arms. I was in a room I recognized at last; a white, high-ceilinged room with a glittering, beautiful marble arch. It was the main ante-room of Prince Hâkon's royal suite in Valkyria. And suddenly it all came back to me with a rush: the acrid, choking powder-smoke in the Jotun's treasure-chamber; the ring of menacing faces; the staggering, frantic figures of the Red King's guards; and, through the gray pall of drifting smoke, that cold, terrible white face of Lord Chalmes, so brave among so many! And again I could see him falling and the

Arch Priest gliding out of the door like a great snake; then another crowd of faces seen through a whirling haze, and then blackness . . . and silence!

I looked past Norma's shoulder and saw a scared knot of women huddled at the window; the figures of Alline and Mrs. Rountree, and the Princess Phaïma with several of her women-in-waiting. They were all staring down out of the open window, and the sight they saw below seemed to terrify them greatly.

A woman's voice screamed in the room. Then suddenly a frenzied roar of triumph floated up from the great courtyard of the palace. It was cut short by a single sharp roll of gunfire. Then silence, a dead silence—the awed hush of expectancy. I wrenched myself up from the couch where I lay, and staggered to the window.

A grim drama was being played out below.

It was, I realized instantly, the revolution that was going to topple the "Lion of Valkyria" down from his throne; but I had no part in it. Raoul de Roquemort was there, I marked, at the head of his wild company of Islam, with the sunlight glittering on his long bright blade and his face illumined by the fighting smile I knew; and Prince Hâkon with him, clad in complete mail; and Ingulf too in mail, with a shining, winged helm of steel, and his fatal claymore—a foot longer than any there; and Sherry,

and old Eric Ivarsson the one-time professor of Oxford; as keen and bold as any Berserker in the Sagas he used to read; and El Zanek the ex-slaver, with his scarred, yellow face ablaze with a dark joy; and swarthy Señor Torres the Portuguese—coolly training the lean black muzzles of the machine-guns to rake the palace steps.

Half a dozen of the King's gay-liveried archers lay sprawled in death across the marble steps, their life-blood welling out upon the white flagstones in a dark crimson stream. In the act of loosing the keen three-foot shafts from their long-bows, a deadly volley from the Martini-Henrys had stricken them down; but behind them through the big arched doors of the palace was pouring a wave of steel-clad soldiers.

They were going to charge—utterly reckless of their lives, but utterly confident of the result—while down below in the courtyard a huddled group of unarmed and helpless slaves cowered in abject terror by the fountains, watching this scene with their rolling eyes.

I swept my glance around in vain for the Red King. Had he died with the rest in the trap he had set or had he escaped? There was no time to wonder. King or no king, the Royal Guards were coming down those steps. And they came, like an avalanche of iron. I saw their stern, cold, double line come sweeping down the broad white stair in a

long wave of glittering steel. But only a few of them ever reached the stair foot.

Half way down the steps, I saw them all stagger and crumple and go to pieces! . . . Cool, brave, crafty Señor Torres! . . and wild old desert-hawk El Zanek, and his iron-nerved master "the little Giaour!" . . Hearts of oak, all! . . . how well they had waited, how terribly they had replied to that charge! From the Maxims had spurted two wicked thin streams that played to right and left across the Guards' ranks like the streams of water from a fire-hose. Nothing that man's brain ever has conceived is deadlier than that thin stream!

At that distance the steel-jacketed bullets crashed through the iron corselets and coats of chain-mail as if they were tinware. A few reeled out from that storm of death, and died on the swords of Ingulf and Prince Hâkon, with his handful of men-at-arms —who had leaped like hounds on their flanks—and on the Frenchman's fatal rapier. Then, into that raving shambles on the stair, the Arabs began shooting pitilessly.

And then began a butchery which might have found a parallel in Mehemet Ali's grim murder of the Mamelukes. I remembered De Roquemort's terrible phrase about the *mitrailleuse*—"the red rain of death!"—and sick with the horror I tried to turn my eyes away, but its cold fascination always drew them back again.

The slaves huddled by the fountain rose up and fled shrieking. Stark fear was stamped upon their faces. They could not stop their ears to the cries and groans of the dying, nor shut their eyes to the red nightmare they saw. In their maddest dreams they had never thought to behold a sight like that.

At last it was all done. The Valkyrian Guard was annihilated. The handful of archers left, who, without a leader, had seen from the safe vantage of the side galleries the Royal Guards die like valiant men in that rain of steel, threw down their arms, awed and cowed. They were spared.

Below on the blood-stained stairs, that writhing, quivering heap of what had been proud, brave, gallant humanity a few brief minutes ago, was a red reminder they would never forget in this world!

Presently it was quiet and still, as if such grim sights were never intended in the scheme of things on earth; and above the white court wheeled silently the black wing of a bird of prey. Yet the mellow crimson glow of the fading sunset still lingered across the dead soldiers, and from the tangled ranks glittered here and there the steel points of their weapons, like jewels of fire. . . . The broad bar of crimson sank lower yet across the palace front, gilding the empty galleries in turn. For a fleeting fraction of time, I saw silhouetted in red relief on an upper gallery a great form in fiery armor, with a distorted face above a flaming red beard. For another in-

stant, it stood there motionless as some iron colossus of Despair—then it had disappeared.

"The Red King!" burst a roar of voices below. "The Butcher himself! . . ."

But Raoul de Roquemort was the first to collect his wits. "A thousand gold Louis apiece to those who take him dead or alive!" he roared. "To me, desert-hawks all! . . . *À moi!*—El Zanek, Mohammed, Ali! . . . Off, and after him!"

Twenty men dashed straight for the stair.

But faster than Raoul de Roquemort and all his wild wolf-pack, sped Prince Hâkon. He saw the throne that was almost won slipping away from him. Like a greyhound he sped across the open, and in a flash I comprehended his purpose.

Well he knew where the royal fox would run to earth—the lower galleries giving to the street level, the blind burrow beneath the keep, that led to the river-embankment and safety, unless he could be cut off. Prince Hâkon was a brave soldier, but not dull-witted; although like many another before him, he would make himself a parricide in the end, to win a throne.

He reached the stair foot a full ten paces ahead of any, and springing up the steps turned and waved his sword, and disappeared through the brazen doors.

Hard after him coursed Ingulf and all the pack.

They poured into the palace in full cry like hounds that bay behind a hunted quarry, and went raging and

stamping through all the empty, silent halls; upsetting the few terror-stricken scullions they found in the kitchen and frightening the royal courtesans half out of their wits with their lean, fierce dark faces; but the royal prey had cheated them! They nosed into every square foot of the keep, from eaves to cellar; except, in fine, the Jotun's treasure-chamber. The Giaour, for good reasons, saw to that. But the chase was bootless, as Prince Hâkon well knew it must be. He knew what they did not know: that the King was escaping into the city to rouse his army and throw a net of troops around the palace, although he was aware that half the army had no love for the Butcher. But that half was elsewhere—on the frontier!

The truth had flashed over me. If Prince Hâkon, the pretender to the throne, failed to destroy his fleeing uncle, his last hope was to beat the royal couriers, who, as he was well aware, would be sent off to Alûki in the northern province, where Hâkon's own regiments garrisoned the frontier. These troops idolized the Prince; once at their head, he was safe. Would Hâkon reach Alûki to light the red blaze of revolution—I asked myself tensely, as the uproar ebbed away.

The day was dying now. And at last came ill news, after a brief, bitter interval of torturing suspense. The Red King had got loose into the city. "The Devil was unchained!" . . . And the King's

heir was missing—gone, too; but his stately, quiet half-sister seemed strangely undisturbed. She was staring into the dusk.

"He will not fail," the girl said proudly, as if in echo of my thoughts. "How well I know his heart of oak! There are still brave soldiers in Valkyria who will die at his bidding, and yonder in the north, at Alûki his own regiment is waiting. Would that they were here, Jarl! . . . would that they were here!" And suddenly she burst into a stormy flood of tears.

I was silent, dismayed by that depth of her revealed despair, in the very hour of that victory—shaken more than I have power to put into words. Then, over the crimsoned sea of spires and roofs, I pointed to the western gates of the city.

"Look there!" A distant swirl of dust swept away from the city's gates, past the line of mighty cliffs, whose gigantic crests were weirdly etched in fire by the lurid, golden glare across the sky. Behind the first, another swirl of dust swept out—then another, and another. They were horsemen, galloping like the wind; but what couriers and what cause? Were they the hawks and the quarry? Had Prince Hâkon escaped from the city, and were those four riders friends or foes? We did not know. It was impossible to know. We could only guess and watch until the windows became black rectangles of shadow against the dusk, and the lights began to flare up in the streets.

It began to rain with a pitiless steadiness as if it would never stop. A vague, dim curtain of fine mist had settled down over the city, giving it a curious resemblance to some huge modern metropolis in the fog. Only the rumble of wheels and the long grind and roar of the tramcars seemed missing out of that illusion. Goblin figures passed to and fro in the fog. The light glimmered feebly through it from the fiery torch held mockingly and inscrutably outstretched, with an ironic dignity, by the colossal statue of the mad Philosopher they had burned alive for his reward. Stentorian voices abruptly began bellowing hoarse commands; there was a faint clash of steel. Soldiers! . . . But the rain and fog had made them invisible.

I felt very weak, suddenly, and ravenously hungry, but could not eat a mouthful till I had asked of Norma the question whose answer I had already guessed only too well.

"And Lord Chalmes?"

"Dead! . . . in the next room," she said with an icy shiver. I bowed my head silently.

"He died like a true Englishman," I said at last, feeling a crushing sense of loss. "He was a better man than I will ever be, Norma."

I realized that I had no hunger any more.

"May the peace of God rest forever with his gallant soul!" I added gravely. "Amen."

And I went in and looked long at his still, white face, so curiously grave and peaceful in death, that

in life had always smiled so mockingly from those chill carven, patrician lips I had once almost hated. But the mocking smile was gone at last, and in its place was a look of unearthly calm that saddened me.

They buried him on the morrow in a little plot of greensward by the fountains, in the white courtyard where the long shadow of the keep fell always. The rain was still beating monotonously and pitilessly out of a gray bitter sky, and we stood uncovered in the keen chill of the dawn, to watch this sad burial of an English Peer in Valkyria.

I sometimes wonder now whether any of the cynical, hysterical great ladies of London, who have so often laid their pretty white wreaths of flowers above the coffin of some popular military hero or polar explorer, would have troubled to lay one here; and what the impeccable, lean, saturnine *post-obit* paragraphers of the *Times* would have said or done, in their ponderous fashion; or what the very severe, but manly females of the Suffrage Party who rail so luridly of the "degenerate British Aristocracy," would have said to see this favorite son of the *Cordon Bleu* lowered into his alien grave?

Would they have understood what he died for?

To two of us at least, it was the Great Tragedy of Valkyrian days. As the clods fell dripping upon the coffin, under the beating rain, Norma broke down and sobbed convulsively. She had found out that she had loved the dead Peer somewhat, after all!

So I led her away gently as I could do. Later, I saw to it that there was a stone Cross set up by the grave-head; and on it I had carved deeply this inscription:

Here lies
All That is Not Immortal of
ROBERT PIERS CROYDON, VISCOUNT
CHALMES,
A Peer of England and of Valkyria,
Oct. 8, 1896.

But it does not stand there to-day. . . .

CHAPTER XXII

PHAÏMA SPEAKS

WE were lords of the palace and the keep, or so it seemed. There were plenty of cowed and beaten slaves and awed serfs to do our bidding, and we lost no time in letting them know that we were their masters now. The same lash the Butcher had used so often upon his idle thralls and parasites hung usefully upon an iron hook where he had left it; and swarthy Señor Torres knew well how to use the lash. It was in his blood-strain to flog with understanding a cringing, sullen mutineer once in a way for the exercise which seemed proper to a *caballero* like himself.

There was good food without stint in the Red King's kitchen and many a stout cask of brown mead, of ale, and goodly wine in the Red King's cellars. We had no need of anything else save water, which is the best of all the things that go gurgling down a man's throat. And water there was in plenty. But the Arabs were of another mind; the writ-and-summons of the Prophet ran—if it ran at all—elsewhere. After their long abstinence they drank what pleased them best, and swaggered up and down the courtyard

with the pride of the conqueror, the greed of gold, and often the lust of sin written plainly enough across their somber faces, for all who could read the human pages not in print. Yet their formidable captain El Zanek knew how to chasten his iron brood, and they never got far out of the hollow of that lean wicked old hand. As for himself, he had got a courtesan or two; and it would seem that he differed little from the sometime soldiers of fortune in most parts and ages of the world, from Sir John Mandeville to Athos, Porthos and Aramis.

He made, none the less, a little mistake when he saw fit to appear in public with a laughing, languishing black-eyed girl coquettishly hanging upon each side, for from around the corner stepped Raoul de Roquemort, who had a trick of being in many places unexpectedly. What followed was interesting.

Their eyes met. There was a grim stare from master to man and an icy-cool gesture, a gleam of something bright, a curt, biting phrase in Arabic that cuts like a steel saw and is reserved for such occasions.

Effectually sobered, that old iniquity humbly slunk away. His *houris* vanished separately. There was no more drinking after that. By some obscure telepathy, a wordless edict was enforced mysteriously—I suppose by El Zanek himself, who bowed to a force superior to Kismet: the Giaour's will. . . .

To me the episode was tremendous.

As I saw it enacted, it illustrated lucidly that man's

singular power over circumstances and men; and it dismayed me. What hope was there for Cecil Rhodes' dream of destiny, in the face of a reality that stood like a rock wall of fact?—the fact against the dream! Men and guns and that iron will behind them—where did I come in? With the Butcher of Valkyria holding the city and the Marquis de Roquemort holding the citadel, there was no room for Cecil Rhodes. Could Ingulf cut that knot if he were King? I remembered the Jotun's Saga:

> "Ingulf his name must be
> Who wins this Treasure:
> DEAD MEN SAY TRUE"

If Hâkon was dead, as seemed like enough, the third faction was without a leader. Yet I had formed a great liking for the Prince and hoped that he had escaped to Alûki and would raise the standard of revolution. As for Ingulf, had he not already fulfilled part of the Saga?—though I had little faith in prophecies, Would he ever fulfil the rest?

What did it matter? I knew that when the fog lifted we would be attacked in overwhelming force. All night through the rain we had caught the steady, ominous tramp of soldiers in the streets of the city. They were massing in the main square below the palace and in the narrow side-streets, as our sentries had marked and reported, within only a few hundred yards of the watch-towers on the walls, but

just out of bow-shot. We were surrounded; and judging from the long sweep of their close-drawn lines, by full five or six regiments of archers and foot-men. Fully half of the Red King's army lay camped before the walls in the fog.

The remaining regiments with his picked cavalry lay at Alûki—some fifteen leagues north straight as the crow flies. It was necessary always to keep a strong garrison stationed on the frontier to overawe the fierce, restless, half-barbarian race of untamed highland breed who lived in the northern province—but lived as free men, not as serfs. They bore, in fine, much the same opinions of Valkyria as the wild Picts and Scots had borne for the Roman garrisons in Britain, until the Emperor Honorius had with-drawn his legions to face other foes. It was not a safe policy, nor a wise one. And they craned necks hungrily, and cast fierce, greedy eyes ever toward the more civilized, luxury-loving capital, with its para-dise-like wonders, its wickedness, its wealth, and its reputed gods and devils, and swore in their wild hearts that one day they would march upon it—as Alaric the Goth marched on Rome! And march they would, but for that thin, menacing line of steel that always faced them at the northern frontier.

But the Red King seemed in no hurry to attack. His crafty policy was evidently to set around us such a cordon of steel-clad infantry as we would never break through, while he waited for the fog to lift. With half his best troops at Alûki, he was not anx-

ious, after the terrible lesson the Frenchman had taught him, to throw away the rest in the fog, against the deadly new weapons he had seen annihilate at one stroke the Valkyrian Guard whom he had believed invincible. In that dripping gray mist sweeping in sullenly off the dim sheet of the lake and the steaming river, we knew the bowstrings of the King's archers were useless, wax them as they would; he must wait for it to break, ere the bowmen could see their mark to shoot at.

But the fog did not break, as he hoped. It settled like a pall over the streets and houses, over the beleaguered keep and the lines of the enemy alike, until through that ghostly wrack of fog and mist, men could scarcely see one another a yard away. Then the rain stopped beating at last; but the long trail of smoke that hung forever above the dying volcano drifted back and mingled with the fog till it effectually shut out the sun—it was no more now than a sickly yellow candle-glare against the sky at midday.

In those black hours of dull inaction, which passed like dreams, I found time to think. . . . But the more swiftly the whirling thoughts kept crowding through my dulled brain, the more baffling was the problem I had to face—how to keep my pledge to Cecil Rhodes! Yet if there was a key at all to such a puzzle, that key was Ingulf. And I fell to thinking again with every sense awake, but coldly, almost terribly concentrated. The key—yes, it was Ingulf;

but how to turn it in the lock? If Hâkon and the royal drunkard destroyed each other—or if Hâkon was already gone and De Roquemort destroyed the drunkard—then . . .

Always that tangled skein wound back to that invincible man, who held us all in the hollow of his blue-blooded hands—the inscrutable Marquis de Roquemort!

Surely the French nation must have some magic in its veins, since it had produced successively a Richelieu, a Napoleon, a Voltaire, and a De Roquemort! Had he guessed my secret mission? Had he read Ingulf's identity? Had he linked him with his dead ancestor, as I had done, and even if he believed Ingulf was the real King, would he not demolish him as ruthlessly and set up Hâkon on the throne? Very likely he would do that. But if Hâkon never turned up, would De Roquemort make his peace then with the Butcher?

No. It was not in his code of honor. It was not in his high birth, nor in his cool courage. He would never become a traitor to such a code as he must have had, from his youth—for so many years; he would never turn back upon such a road as that.

I had seen one man die sublimely because he too had a code that he would not change. Every baser instinct he possessed—and all men have a few base instincts—must have recoiled against that sacrifice. A few moments' delay and he could have lived—and probably won *the* woman. But there was the un-

alterable code. It was very simple. So he came back in the room and died.

No. De Roquemort would never make a truce with the Butcher. If Hâkon never turned up, it might mean nothing less than complete annihilation for us all, but Raoul de Roquemort would go down with the rest of us.

He detested the fog. All true Gascons from the south of sunny France abhor a sad sky. He smoked the very last one of his monogrammed cigarettes; taking a turn restlessly up and down the ante-room.

I watched him—polite, bored, *triste;* with the ring of confidence in every heel-tap. Then I walked over and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Well, Raoul de Roquemort, the king-maker!"

"*Bien!* my friend—you seem sarcastic? *Peste!* The king-maker? And what of it?"

I pointed significantly through the window. "Look there!" I said. "The fog is breaking! What do you see? Six regiments of infantry waiting to spring at our throats! Before this time to-morrow we will be attacked in tremendous force, and God help us then! We cannot hold this place against fifty times our number. We are like rats in a trap! And you ask 'what of it?' I said bitterly. "You, the king-maker! That is your work."

"You are wrong, Monsieur!" he said calmly. "It is the work of destiny, not mine, and Fate is the *croupier* who turns the wheel of life. As for me,

I have but played my own stake on the table, with yours and all the rest. What matter, since all have an equal chance at *le banque du Diable?* Have you forgotten the machine-guns, Monsieur? These *canaille* cannot face them. After all, *q'est-ce que c'est que ca—un abattoir*—to pile up sheep in a slaughter trench! Bah! I tell you they will never stand up to the *mitrailleuse!*"

He had told me nothing! But this time I was recklessly resolved to get the probe in deep; to get at what he knew. So I continued ruthlessly: "Don't deceive yourself. You can't keep them off forever. Your ammunition won't last. And after that, what? I can tell you. No quarter for us, and for the women, worse than death!" In spite of his superb *sang-froid,* he blanched a little. "How do you like it now?"—and I launched a last staggering shaft—"Mr. Emissary of Leopold's Black Protectorate!"

He started sharply and gave me a swift flashing side-glance. Suddenly he laughed. And to my sheer surprise he sent back a better one, with a cutting-edge to it as keen and hard as a diamond.

"You enlighten me, Monsieur," said he, ironically. "You fly so unmistakably the Union Jack! You fairly unwrap its silken folds under my nose, and br-r-r-r!—you run it up to the peak! Yes, that Flag! . . . *Pardieu!* I never guess at things. The old rule of 'two and two make four,'—*voila!* Re-

verse it, mark you, and two away from four leave always two. . . . Ah! well, as masks are off at last, and you will have it so!

"So," he continued blandly, "shall I tell you whose emissary *you* are? You, Captain Severn, carry the epaulets of your colonizing Premier—Cecil Rhodes. So be it! The king-maker against the empire-builder! We shall see who wins."

He had hipped me once more.

But the Devonshire breed is stubborn. I eyed him doggedly. "We shall see," I threw in. "The play is not played out until the curtain falls."

"Exactly—you put it like a diplomat! And meanwhile we fight in a common cause?"

"For three women's honor—yes."

"And after that, Monsieur?"

"Pistols—if I may suggest? Valkyria would be too small to hold us both. And I have no fancy to be pinned like a fly on that devil's rapier of yours."

"Sacred name of twenty thousand *fiacres!*" quoth he, delightedly. "By my father's grave in Gascony, you are a true English bull-dog after all. Be it so. Pistols—if you insist. *Voyons!*" He inquired with an air of solicitude that was real: "And your wounds, my friend of many days, how are they now?" His concern was so genuinely unforced that it amazed me.

"My wounds are nothing—a few sword-slashes under the skin, and a rap across the head." And

then Sherry's face appeared in the door, with other faces behind him; Dr. Eric Ivarsson's, and Ingulf's.

The Marquis nodded to them gallantly, with his Gascon courtesy. "Eh, *mon ami,*" he queried of Sherry, "what report of the enemy's vêdettes—of the siege? What news of the Prince?"

"The fog is clearing off," quoth Sherry, "and the moat is swirling full of water, racing like the river Taw! Their pickets are closing in. We are in for a ripping row!" he added, grinning cheerfully. But his jaw fell at length. He caught our eyes, and shook his head.

"No sign from Prince Hâkon. . . . Dead, perhaps, poor devil! He will never come back——"

The girl Phaïma had glided in silently behind him, her expressive face ablaze with the pale light of enthusiasm I had seen once before. The girl seemed sometimes strangely gifted with a power that was akin to inspiration, and perhaps not altogether earthly.

"He will come back," she said simply, with that pale blaze of prophecy flashing out. "You do not know him as I do. He will come back. The gods in Valhalla will preserve him. He will come, and his tall Jotuns behind him, all in glittering mail on their great war-horses! You have not seen those men, my lords! and the white, dim Valkyries who seem to ride like the wind behind them, far, far up above in the blue cloud-driven sky!" Then she paused,

as every eye was turned toward her in a sort of hushed expectancy, and a look of intense horror crept slowly over her beautiful, stately face.

"Valkyria! . . ." she gasped, in an amazed, thrilling voice. "Can such things be on earth? . . . Or am I mad to dream of them? To dream that Valkyria so soon must fall! Gone! . . the white, proud city builded more by gods than men—gone! as though she had never been!" Suddenly her voice sunk: "Valkyria! . . . O well-loved pleasant City of the Lost!—with her gardens of Paradise . . . her courts of sin! . . all swallowed by a red sea of flame! . . . Gone her noble palaces and queenly temples—I see them all toppling together in red ruin, and the fierce flames lapping over them pitilessly—leaping hungrily out of the earth, up to the black sky! . . quenchless, eager flames lit by the angry gods who have decreed that Valkyria shall fall . . . forever!"

She staggered back and dropped in a dead swoon.

Ingulf lifted the girl up gently in his strong arms and laid her inert, shapely figure down on the marble couch that was no whiter than her face.

And even then, I marveled at the human heart of a woman! For Norma—a white vision of pity that I can still see framed in the doorway—imperiously waved back the yellow-faced, ashen slaves, who came crowding closer, and with a little sob of dismay, flew instantly to the side of this daughter of a pagan race. Minutes after, Phaïma opened

her eyes. They had a shot, strained expression in them. The girl seemed dazed as they led her into another room, still shuddering.

"By Jove!" said Sherry in a gasp, tapping the silent Doctor nervously on the breastbone with a shaky forefinger; "an uncomfortable presentiment the young lady had, if it all comes true. But it's all tommyrot, eh?"

The old archeologist shuddered as he replied:

"My friend, I sometimes think that our modern world, with its levity and its cynicism, makes a strange error in taking at their face valuation only, these startling phenomena of nature and the human brain. My own mind has convinced me that even among the barbarian races of the earth, the faculty of 'second sight' is not so impossible as it seems. True, they are only predictions of an individual; but they have a weird way of working out, as though they were suggested by some glimpse behind the Screen. There is no doubt that among the primitive Northmen of Iceland, there arose at long intervals of time, 'Alruna women,' or seers, who predicted things which frequently came true. This girl, with her pure mind, may have some spark of genius, like the poets of the Victorian Age, that helps her to make a better guess at the future than most of us. And I confess, for my part, that this city of Valkyria, with those millions of litres of gas drained from the volcano and stored in a hollow catacomb of stone pipes and giant reservoirs beneath its streets,

seems to me like a city built above some sleeping caldron of Hell-fire—waiting to engulf it all!"

He was silent. I looked at my watch; it was almost six o'clock. In half an hour the darkness would come.

The Marquis seemed to read my thoughts. "At daylight," he said coolly, "they will attack. The moat is impassable to-night for footmen or archers, and the drawbridge is the only key to the keep. *Morbleu!* my hawks are on watch at every covert. The Red King will not throw away his troops in the dark!"

Mrs. Rountree came in noiselessly. She wanted her glass-stoppered bottle of smelling-salts from the window-seat for Phaïma; the Princess was quite calm at last. She herself appeared pale and unnerved. She was, in spite of it all, still as pallidly beautiful as some white statue of Peace, with her youthful, calm face, big vivid black eyes and black hair that was growing slightly silvered with gray. The gray had not shown there at all, four months ago!

The French soldier of fortune eyed her with silent appreciation. She was at once both the exact negative of his volatile and fiery personality, and that strange paradox, its absolute "plus." The handsome widow fascinated him; perhaps it was her eternal serenity. He even smiled at her subtly now.

He made a gay gesture, then bent gallantly and kissed her white hand.

The smile and the gesture seemed to shatter her calm.

"Ah! Raoul," she said, "you frighten me with your *sang-froid!* Is there some dreadful danger hanging over us?"

The Marquis laughed. With disarming audacity he had chucked her under her pretty chin.

"Be at rest, *ma cherie!*" he replied gravely. "You are as safe here as in the Tuileries in Paris. *Pouf!* there will be a road to France and to the world to-morrow! I promise you that my Black Company would clear a path to Valhalla itself, if it only were on earth. *Allons!* . . Take a turn with me in the courtyard—in the evening hush! . . . the peace . . ."

He linked arms with her and they went out.

Mechanically, I ate and drank. Hours drifted by. A dark starless vault shut in the mystery of night. At midnight we made an unexpected round of the pickets along the walls; the Giaour was taking no chances of surprise by a night attack. The result stirred in me a new respect for his grip on the unstable souls of men. Heads abruptly popped out of black corners, like life-sized and inhuman Jacks-in-a-box. Eyes gleamed at us out of the dark: the preludes for sudden, sharp challenges. The Frenchman's hawks were awake.

All of the rest snatched stoical, amazing sleep. So we went back and waited. The night wore away, till at last, through the dim black rectangles of the palace windows glimmered the ghost of the dawn.

CHAPTER XXIII

HOW THE BLACK COMPANY HELD THE KEEP

THE tall black windows of the room swiftly paled to gray, and faded into white. The day was breaking, and in the east glowed a pale bar of flame. Leaving the palace still asleep, we went out through the shadowy corridors, each man grimly looking to his weapons as we went, and made our way across the dim courtyard to the sheer, huge gray walls of the keep.

As we reached the battlements, the faint rosy gleam of sunrise was breaking across the sky—a sunrise as clear and perfect as if there had never been a shadow of men's sordid plots, their loves and hates, and their fatal ambitions, to mar its almost unearthly beauty. It gilded the tall white temple fanes and stately spires with a broad sweep of molten flame, and flashed from the steel caps of the men-at-arms, now moving to and fro like ants in the King's great armed camp below us, that seemed suddenly stirring to life.

It glittered, too, upon the steel cuirasses of that broken company of archers, whom the French soldier of fortune—ever the same bold, politic leader

of men—had managed already to impress into his iron service. Half with threats and promises, and half by pointing out their strangely hopeless and desperate plight, he had won them like Cæsar's self! If the Butcher triumphed they would be slain like sheep for deserters; while at the first sign of treachery, his Arab mercenaries would turn their guns on them and wipe them out. Well they knew that he spoke the truth. For the rest, if we won the day, they would be well rewarded and enlisted in the next Valkyrian Guard.

It was the fortune of war; a shift of the pawns upon the board. And they had joined him readily enough—already half alienated by the King's mad cruelties and tyranny. About a hundred strong, they were all picked men and master-bowmen, who could drive their terrible three-foot arrows through a mail corselet at fifty paces. With Hâkon's two-score men-at-arms, the new levies brought our force up to some two hundred fighting men.

The odds against us were colossal. Two hundred men against six regiments of infantry, and a foe able to bring up crushing reinforcements! Yet to look at the fighting smile of the invincible Marquis de Roquemort—unruffled, superbly confident and icy-cool—you might have guessed the shoe was on the other foot. For the little Giaour was never so dangerous as when he smiled. I had learned that when he appeared sad you might tread upon

his tail and escape perhaps alive—never when he smiled.

It was true we possessed an extraordinary advantage over our foes in the terrible superiority of modern weapons of war over mere bows and axes. Yet I had already seen how deadly straight and far those tall archers could send their fatal shafts, and I thought of the long-vanished, stricken fields of Crécy and Poictiers, where the mail-clad chivalry of France had all gone down together in a red wave of men and horses before the biting rain of the English arrows—archers who had drawn no better bows than these! And as I looked down at the dense mass of men-at-arms and bowmen in the sudden hush which had fallen on them all, it came over me that I was about to witness such a fight as every man who lived through it would keep in his waking dreams—a murder fierce and fell.

For we held an almost impregnable fortress.

The great Keep reared its hoary head like some huge monster of the past, on a commanding rise of ground which sloped off sharply on either side to the narrow streets below. Before it lay the wide, deep moat full twenty-five yards across, with fifteen feet of dark green water swirling in long eddies like a mill-race, till it boiled over a stone dam at its far end into what appeared to be a canal intended to drain off the backwash of the city's sewage. On the northerly side of the keep, a broad loop of the

river washed sullenly against a deep embankment that fell away to a sheer drop of fifty feet; while to the west the broken spur of the mountainside ran out to the steep rise on which the palace stood. Only a steeplejack could have come up that wall of naked rock, worn smooth by the rains of ages long as they fell down it into the river.

A swift-flowing drain at the cliff-foot, jagged with protruding rocks making navigation impossible, fed the moat from the rapid current of the river; and from the massive gate of the keep, a steep slope ran down to where the moat was ordinarily crossed. Two round barbican towers of buttressed masonry rose from the center of the moat; a permanent bridge connecting them with the castle shore, and a drawbridge with the outer shore. This drawbridge was always up in time of war, and a small force could hold the barbicans against a regiment.

In the fog, hours ago, I had walked on top all round the walls of the castle. They were ten feet thick. Under cover of that humid veil of mist, I had explored the place alone. Its tremendous, cruel strength, its forbidding sweep, had staggered me.

At last I comprehended clearly why the King had not attacked us in that rock-built eyrie till the fog lifted. He knew the strength of the place and its power to stand a siege; for an assault could come only on the side protected by the great moat. Whoever would take that keep must attack from the

Square and the narrow streets in front. And at last I understood why the Valkyrian kings had held their mailed grip for so many centuries on this barbarian race, whose wild pagan hands must have torn their dynasty from the throne long since, had it been a thing they could have done.

Such was the grim citadel of Valkyria. In truth it was a fortress worth defending. Yet to pit six regiments against barely two hundred mercenaries! It was like setting Germany to crush Gibraltar! We were hemmed in a huge rock trap.

But if we could not get out, the King's army would find it hard to get in. De Roquemort had already drawn in his pickets from the walls and posted the archers in their stead, where they could shoot down into the enemy from the battlements. Below, from fifty loop-holes, the Black Company faced the foe; and at the embrasures, which had been purposely widened so as to rake the whole front, I saw on both sides of the huge iron gates of the keep the black gleam of a machine-gun manned by Señor Torres and the gaunt-faced ex-artilleryman of Egypt. Sherry came up close to me and caught my arm.

He pointed at the dense mass of the King's army, that was beginning to stir at last.

"They are moving," he burst out. "Our little row with the Matabele was nothing to this." His jaw dropped. "By Gad, there will be some carnage before long!"

The old scientist droned behind his shoulder:

"It is Homeric," he cackled, "the old against the new!" His cracked, aged voice added harshly: "Steel bullets against the steel armor of the past. . . . It is epic—the Iron Age rising to crush To-day. I wonder if they will do it?"

His old face was twitching fiercely. Hunched at his hips, I saw he had two big pistols crammed in leather holsters, and a magazine rifle standing in a niche of the wall. In strange contrast, a pace beyond, clad in the chain-mail of his martial ancestors, Ingulf stood leaning on his gigantic sword. His eyes seemed like points of flame, as he stood watching the foe.

All that remains in my memory still! . . . like some wildly vivid dream-picture which I seemed to have seen more than once *before* . . . the vague, mad illusion of some old life lived long ago! A few seconds more, and the red ball of the sun came gliding sublimely above the brilliant rim of the great bowl-shaped crater, and with it came the Red King's soldiers, with a roar like the sea on the beach, and a long shiver of steel.

Little they realized as they came sweeping up to the attack, rank upon rank in their close-packed, brave array, with the sun-blaze on their steel harness and the long, scarlet pennons floating out gallantly over each company; forty men-at-arms deep, with three regiments of foot forming the chest of their

army, and a regiment of archers banked on either side, another regiment in reserve—little they guessed the red reception that was waiting for them. The grim game of war has changed little since the campaigns of William the Conqueror; though its weapons have grown more deadly. But of this they neither recked nor knew.

At the moat they recoiled. None was anxious to try that passage. Even cavalry would have balked at that fifteen feet of swirling green water, full twenty-five yards across from brink to shore. Yet crossed it must be.

Out strode a giant in mail and bellowed a deep command. It was the Red King. A moment we saw him, then he was hidden from view. And watching keenly the dark mass of the foe, I saw some dozen men in brown leather jerkins drag up several great wooden scaling-ladders, each having an iron grapnel on one end. Presently the mailed swarm parted and I could see long lines of men pulling on ropes, and dragging forward on rude rollers some colossal, dim objects, the sight of which instantly made my heart jump, inside my chest. Then I saw that they were long Viking galleys. In the fog, they had been floated up close by way of the river, and the King's design was plainly to launch them in the moat to ferry his soldiers across.

It was an unexpectedly bold and cunning scheme, and in truth the best way to get the thing done; since the great moat drained off its overflow into the canal

down a rock-walled dam with a fall of almost twenty feet, up which it was not in men's power to drag the galleys. The largest of them was nearly fifty feet long, with double oar-banks in the waist and a high, curved poop; and had a tall white horse-head carved out from the swell of the bow. In my brain, at sight of that strange figurehead, surged up dim memories of the fabled Wooden Horse of Troy. One of the other galleys had a lion's head carved on the prow; and another a vulture's beak.

They launched them with a thick swarm of men in each, and still no sign from De Roquemort, though they had drifted broadside on, well under shot from the keep. Was he mad, I asked myself, to allow those galleys to land the troops?

"It is time!" he rapped out suddenly. "The rats are aboard their own trap." He was watching the galleys with a grim smile. "Let your guns go!" he roared to the Portuguese. "*Now!*"

To the grave, my memory will carry that scene. I can see it still! The crowded galleys had drifted into midstream. The swarms of men on board them tried to cover themselves with a row of shields; the rowers striving to ship their oars, hampered by the close-jammed crews.

And then went up a yell of fear so mad, so piercing, that it rose high above the long, steady, spitting roar of the machine-guns. A frightful spurt of steel missiles played upon the hapless gal-

leys, hurtling through the rotten planking at the water-line, till the green water boiled in from a hundred gaps and holes.

Sickened by the sight, I averted my eyes.

When I looked again, the big galley with the horse-head figurepiece had swung around and was going down by the bows. A raving swarm of men in her fought for possession of the poop, while the terrible steel rain beat them into a gory heap of shrieking madmen. Both of the remaining galleys had settled to the water's edge and were filling swiftly. Then the green swirl raced across their gunwales and they went down.

The wreckage of sinking galleys and writhing bodies choked the stream; then they were gone. The heavy armor of the men-at-arms dragged them down to the black slime at the bottom of the moat, and in a few seconds all that remained of those who had embarked was a long ripple of green water from which the white horse-head still protruded as if with a mocking, wild irony of desolation. Some few of the Arabs, carried beyond themselves, broke from their posts at the loop-holes and mounted the ramparts, the better to watch what was happening. But the cool voice of the French Giaour pealed above the roll of the guns.

"Down, down, wolves of the Black Company!" he cried. "Have you forgotten the archers? Back to the loop-holes! Not a man must show his head above the walls! To your posts!"

The Arabs obeyed. And suddenly the storm of arrows from the King's archers broke loose, whistling past the heads of the men upon the parapets. But to that fire our own veteran bowmen replied with deadly effect, the long shafts screaming down and burying themselves to the feather in the bodies of the King's soldiers massed upon the edge of the moat. Nearly two hundred men were put out of the action by the fatal aim of our archers, while we lost barely half a dozen in return.

And still, under cover of that whistling hail of archery, they thrust out a bridge roughly improvised of rafts and pontoons brought up from the rear, although the deadly cross-fire from the machine-guns swept away each time those who had the temerity to launch them. Fresh troops were brought up with a ruthless disregard of certain death. The Red King was throwing away the lives of his soldiers on a magnificent scale. The moat was half choked with the crimson wreckage of men and timbers, and the pontoons grounded against the sunken galleys and jammed fast. It was impossible to prevent them from landing the troops; and across the swaying bridge a dense column of men-at-arms reeled forward to the assault, while the guns in less than ten minutes had piled up nearly fifteen hundred dead and wounded below the keep.

They strove to scale the barbicans from their floating bridge; but the pontoons half awash gave

an ill footing to plant ladders for the attempt. Then the thing which we had foreseen came to pass. I saw the straining pontoons slowly careen under the weight of the mailed swarm of men, and rip apart; and abruptly a hoarse clamor of warning rose. But too late!

The crowded bridge gave one sickening lurch, and broke in two. With a hideous scream of horror, the dense ranks of footmen, pushed on by the remorseless pressure from their comrades behind, writhed and sank and disappeared! They drowned like flies in the moat, whose dark, foul waters were now churned into a nameless mire where some six hundred men had found a dishonored grave.

As the sunken road of Ohain had been Napoleon's misfortune at Waterloo, and the grave of the Cuirassiers—so had the moat which defended his own palace-fortress become the Red King's undoing; and the fish must have fed fat that day in Valkyria.

For the best part of an hour, the lull in the fray lasted till the Red King's soldiers, under the withering fire of Torres' machine-guns, had built the bridge afresh, with great balks and timbers they had torn from the river-quays hard by. But we could not stop an army. Once more a strong column of foot was thrown across the new bridge they had built firmer and stronger, and rushed up to the assault.

They tried vainly to hook the iron grapnels of

the great scaling-ladders over the rampart. Three times the pitiless stream of bullets fairly blew them back from the muzzles of the guns.

It was a sight to freeze the blood in a man's veins. As fast as one deep rank of wild faces surged up and was suddenly swept away, another row appeared behind them, only to be mowed down in turn as if by the stroke of some mighty scythe.

At last they drew back, aghast.

Down the slope before the gray limestone walls there lay a windrow of corpses six feet high, over which they had to literally climb to get at us. Well nigh two regiments of the King's army lay shattered in that writhing line of horror which still heaved slowly up and down like the coils of some enormous sleeping monster with its tail flung trailing back, right into the crimsoned waters of the moat, where a third regiment had met annihilation. Of the Butcher's proud array there remained now only its chest, and a single regiment of reserves drawn up in the great Square below, under the colossal statue of the dead Philosopher. They had not yet come into the action.

Overhead in the placid blue sky, wheeled the shadowy brigade of the silent scavengers of the air—waiting with the vulture's patience. . . .

There was a menacing lull—then, suddenly, like a tidal wave, the foe burst through and over the barrier of dead and dying and surged right up to the iron gates.

The Marquis de Roquemort watched them come, with an absent, curiously sad smile.

"Name of Napoleon!" he swore, amazed. "They are men! With five army corps like that in Europe, and modern artillery behind them, I could avenge Sedan! . . . Hark! As I live, they are beating in the gates!"

Crash! Fifty men swung a giant ram against the iron portals of the keep. They had brought up a great tree-trunk, with the limbs lopped to gain hold. Once more it thundered against the gates, then the machine-guns belched a hell-storm of steel, and the whole reeling fabric of men and ram abruptly collapsed.

For the moment, the attack was checked as the guns swept away its first broken wave. Yet I knew the lull could not last. I stared at the bulging hinges set in the masonry. The bent iron-work was beaten inward and the stone arch itself was cracked and riven at the base by the powerful blows of the ram. One more assault like that and the gates must be driven in. But the Frenchman had seen it too.

"To me, archers!" roared De Roquemort. "To me, men-at-arms, and hold the keep! We will beat them yet!"

They obeyed. The archers had shot away their last shafts, but protected by the ramparts they had lost only a few men; and every man among them was a picked swordsman, encased in steel helmet

and mail cuirass. They swarmed down from the wall and massed behind the guns, drawing their long, heavy swords; while the men-at-arms headed by Ingulf ranged themselves alongside, with an answering yell. Like an echo, a woman's voice pealed out above every other sound.

It was Phaïma's voice. . . . She stood fearlessly upon the perilously narrow stone window-ledge of the jutting main wing of the palace, like a white angel of battle pointing to the north.

"THE JOTUNS! They come, they come! . . . Look!—see their sword-points flash in the sun! Prince Hâkon of Valkyria did not die! . . . The gods have sent him back! We win the day!"

I swept my eyes to the north.

Beyond the King's lines, over the wide maze of narrow streets spread out below like a panorama, I saw a moving cloud of dust wheel round the great loop of the Alûki road, then sweep straight up to the city's gates. The sun-blaze caught a fiery glitter of keen flashing white sparks in the swirl of dust—the light glancing from the points of the weapons of a great body of cavalry swiftly coming closer.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CLAYMORE OF DOUGALL MACDOUGALL

ABOVE the roar of the battle, I heard the steady drumming of thousands of hoofs, and presently I caught the rippling sheen of five thousand mail cuirasses, all in motion together. They came sweeping up through the broad central artery of Valkyria at the gallop—fifty dragoons abreast; their heavy horses racing neck-and-neck, and the steel mail of their riders blazing in the African sun—the most magnificent corps of disciplined cavalry that I have ever seen, or ever will again.

At their head rode a man on a great black war-horse—as I had guessed, Prince Hâkon the Pretender; though I could not see his face.

The troops drawn up in the main Square faced about to meet the shock—but too late! . . . There was a long sweeping charge of the heavy cavalry right through them, crashing into the demoralized mass of archers and men-at-arms, grinding them down under the ramping iron hoofs of the war-horses and cutting a red lane through the disordered array of footmen. Taken in the rear, they broke and fled like sheep in a mad rout, with Prince Hâkon's cavalry thundering in pursuit.

Looking back, I saw that the tall white form of the girl, poised perilously on the narrow window-ledge of the palace behind us, had disappeared. Phaïma had gone back. I had a fleeting vision of other faces at the windows, and seemed to see hers among them. She was safe. But the roar of pounding hoof-beats was unheard by the Red King's soldiers who were battering upon the keep once more. It was drowned by the blows of the powerful ram against the gates, and the triumphant yell which went up as both huge iron wings fell inward with a grinding crash. We leaped back, barely in time to save ourselves from being buried in the débris of that twisted mass of iron.

A gleaming wave of axe-men poured into the breach, in a terrific assault led by the Red King himself.

They were met by Ingulf's mailed men-at-arms, and by De Roquemort and his valiant archers. But the sheer weight of superior numbers forced us to fall back. Step by step, we withdrew across the courtyard and up the broad white stair. On each platform in succession, we made a stand and left a ring of dead below to mark our stubborn retreat.

At last we drew back in a grim line at the top; and as our foes came surging up the remaining steps, we stood firm as a steel wall. The long flashing blades played across our front like a continuous glare of Summer lightning; and the shock of the

encounter was like the clang of a hundred anvils ringing out all together.

The guns had escaped the disaster. The falling gates had missed them by barely six inches; but for the moment, they were useless. Our gunners dared not turn them upon that press of mingled friends and foes. Yet crafty Señor Torres had the supreme presence of mind to train a Maxim across the gaping breach, and the gun began to spit a stream of bullets nothing could pass.

I saw De Roquemort pass his rapier through the body of a foe and spin round like a cat to engage another. Then a shadowy form in dull mail harness towered over him and a great axe flashed up. But the blow fell harmlessly aside as the old scholar of Oxford reached over the Frenchman's shoulder and emptied his revolver into the fierce face of the axe-bearer, who instantly collapsed. Then I became grimly concerned in defending myself against the rush of a mail-clad Berserker whose glaring eyes gave me a cold shiver as he did his best to cut off my head. A heavy pistol ball stopped him abruptly. To this day, I am unaware who it was fired that shot—myself or another.

An exasperated voice was saying:

"Blast you!—you would, would you? . . ." and turning around, I beheld my barrister kinsman blow out the brains of a Valkyrian soldier who was apparently trying to hew off his legs with a formidable axe. Even as Sherry fired at his tormentor, he was

forced to spring into the air to avoid the sweep of the axe; but the shot sped true. With a hoarse scream that rang in my ears, the soldier dropped dead.

A gigantic figure in dented and blood-stained mail came raging up the stair, swinging an enormous sword. It was the King of Valkyria. I heard the rattle of the drawbridge, the shouts of the men De Roquemort had posted at the crank and the creak of the great winch. Then the hollow beat of hoofs sounded upon the bridge as the vanguard of Prince Hâkon's cavalry thundered across the moat to our aid; and Torres stopped firing.

The Prince, with a shout to his officers, had leaped from his horse and had thrown himself into that maelstrom of steel, where only a man in mail armor could live. The tall dragoons dismounted by scores under the blackened stone arch, and rushed in at his heels to launch themselves upon the King's partizans.

The Red King had cleared a space in front of him by terrible, long sweeps of his sword; and each time he struck home, a foe went crashing down the blood-mired steps. But in vain! The gleaming hedge of swords closed in remorselessly around the King's axe-men, who now saw they were hopelessly outnumbered. Attacked from front and rear, they recoiled.

"They are trapped!" the ex-professor squeaked in my ear. "Look there!" he gurgled. "They

"The Red King had cleared a space in front of him with terrible, long sweeps of his sword"

are all going mad together with the Berserk rage!"

The King's men were making a last grim stand around the stair-foot, and on the red-stained landings from which we had in our turn fallen back as each successive wave of foes had come rolling up the great stair. But it was our turn now, and the gallant remnant of our brave men-at-arms and archers stood waiting at the top for them with dripping blades; while below all raged Prince Hâkon and his mailed Jotuns, as the last fierce eddy of the fight surged up the steps. Of the Black Company there were left standing some eighteen gaunt, blood-smeared men, with barely half a dozen rounds of cartridges apiece in their bandoliers. All the rest of them were gone to find the dark gates of the Prophet's Paradise, and the immortal, shining *houris* of their dreams. . . . Yet the survivors cheered madly as they saw their enemies at last caught and crushed between the upper and nether millstones.

The trapped Valkyrians, drawn up around their King, died hopelessly, like the English at Senlac; but they died hard—all save a few craven-hearted fugitives who hid themselves in the palace; fleeing pell mell, into the deserted side-galleries below, that were used by the royal slaves. They fled with the fear of death in their hearts. Among them I had a momentary glimpse of the convulsed face of Agi the archer—cut off from his fallen master, who, at least, was going to die like a king. I beheld the

bowman vanishing into a narrow doorway like a hunted fox to earth.

Behind them rushed the wolf-pack of Hâkon, mingled with a few of the Black Company. They ruthlessly butchered the King's partizans without quarter, wherever they caught them hiding. Those fear-craven wretches knew they had to die—and they died. I heard the muffled echo of gunshots in the slaves' quarters, and the dying howls of the quarry. But Hâkon's dogs of war, for all their hot search, failed to catch the fleeing Agi—as they found out to their sorrow later.

Meanwhile my eyes roved around for the Arch Priest Fangari, with the commendable purpose of putting an end to all his wicked plots with a bullet; but he was missing. The cunning priest had either escaped into the city, or else had fallen in the assault.

Presently the red drama was done. . . . The only foe left afoot was the King of Valkyria. He stood on the slippery platform a dozen steps below us, in the center of a ring of dead. None seemed eager to cross swords with that menacing, mailed figure that waited like a wolf at bay for each warrior who came at him; while the blows of his terrible sword clove deep through helmet and mailshirt, and ever cut the life-strings of their owners. He was still erect; but as two or three of the Swahilis leveled their pieces to fire, I saw the Marquis de

Roquemort suddenly strike up their guns with his long rapier. I think he had the strange hope of pitting himself and his marvelous sword-play against the royal drunkard he had hurled from his throne.

He made a pace forward and stopped—for out from the line of Valkyrians strode Prince Hâkon, brandishing a bloody sword. Pretender and parricide though he might have been, his was a heart of oak, and he knew how to make his soldiers idolize him.

Caught in a trap between two foes, the Red King glared around fearfully; then with a wild shout, he rushed up the marble steps. With half a dozen great bounds, he had reached the top and hewed down a man-at-arms, then another, scattering armed men like chaff. He leaped straight for the entrance. But his way was barred by Ingulf—a tall Jotun all in mail like himself, with a cold blaze of triumph in his fierce steel-gray eyes, a granite jaw and a huge sword that rose and fell like a bar of light, as they began striking at one another, circling and stamping like a pair of fencers, and hammering like smiths in a ringing forge.

By some unwritten freemasonry of battles, men drew back and watched this fell fight rage to and fro without interfering. Foot by foot, as they circled around each other like hawks, the King edged his way toward the great brazen doors. They were flung wide open.

What mad hope he had, what dark treachery lay

behind those burning eyes—who can say? Hard pressed, he stepped backwards through the brazen doorway. Ingulf sprung in after him and launched a shower of blows at the King, who parried each terrible stroke as it fell, with superb strength and skill, retreating a yard at every step. They went stamping down the empty corridors—through the arched portal, step by step into the great hall and right up to the foot of the throne.

I followed, with a cocked pistol in my hand and the cold-blooded resolve that at the first sign of evil, I would utterly forget the ancient and honorable rules of medieval hand-to-hand combats and shoot the King dead; though it might be next door to murder. Yet as I watched the keen blue sparks play and shiver, and listened to the iron music of the clashing blades, the conviction came over me again that Ingulf was the real King of Valkyria, and that in some unexpected way he was winning back his kingdom with the sword. Where had he learned that deadly skill at arms, unless it was in some royal palace of his youth?

The sparks flew out—the blows clanged like a dozen steel hammers ringing all in chorus; and Ingulf hewed on terribly as if his arm would never weary. The Red King had proved that day that he was the best swordsman in the kingdom, but he could not shake off Ingulf's Berserk fury. The Butcher had met his match at last with the sword.

Backed against the dais like a mad boar, the King could go no further. If he had sought some hidden door in the wall, he would never reach it.

And, it may be with that black despair in his soul, he turned like a wild beast at bay and struck back with such awful force that the blade bit right through Ingulf's steel casque and half an inch into the skull, laying open the old scar of a grim wound he had got years before—where or how he could not remember.

Ingulf went staggering back, and I was about to fire when I saw him recover himself, and saw an extraordinary change sweep over his features. For an instant, he stared at the King so dreadfully that the other quailed. . . . For the blow which had narrowly missed being his death must have freed some old splinter of bone pressing down from the skull against his brain. As if in that flash of time, instantaneously as a lightning bolt, memory had come back! . . . And in Ingulf's face I saw a look of complete realization of his own identity—of the identity of the man he was fighting: the Usurper who had killed his father, as it proved, and would have killed him too. But he had fled, as a boy, across the mountains with his memory wrecked by that blow on the head from a battle-axe years ago. . . . That was the queer gap in his life—his hiatus. He had fallen in with the slavers who had gone across the desert . . . to the slave-marches of Africa. . . .

They had made a fighting-man of him instead of selling him for a slave.

I heard the claymore hiss through the air and saw the King reel—reel, and stagger back, dropping his sword. Ingulf had struck home! . . . with that memory! . . . and the terrific force of the blow clove through helm and skull, and deep into the Red King's brain. He lurched with a dull crash to the foot of the throne—dead.

Ingulf stood gazing at his dead foe with that weird look of complete comprehension in his face, just as the Marquis de Roquemort, with Sherry and the gray old Doctor came up to the throne; and behind them the Princess Phaïma and many more; with Prince Hâkon at the head of his victorious officers. They came trooping up to the marble dais, on which shone a single ray of sunlight, through the crimson curtains of the royal alcove whose dead creator would never sleep there again. The bar of light fell across his face; it was strangely cold and austere, as though in slipping off the cords of life, he had left behind him the facial hypocrisy, the sensual stare, with the evil he had wrought all his days.

Looking down fixedly at that cold face of his fallen uncle, Prince Hâkon muttered, half sardonically:

"Dead! . . . at last! One madman less in a mad world and one more fiend in Hela! Well, though he lived a drunkard, at least he died like a King!"

And he flashed a strange glance at Ingulf. Was it imagination, or had Hâkon betrayed his thoughts by a start of recognition? But his features hardened, and once more became triumphant and cold.

CHAPTER XXV

A KING WHO FOUND HIS THRONE

EVEN time and distance have left that extraordinary scene in the Valkyrian palace still etched vividly in my memory. Ingulf was standing over the dead King, his face ablaze with many emotions. In his hand was the big naked claymore; the sword of the dead and gone Scots adventurer. What a wild "tableau" he made! . . . The other actors were posed around him—the French Marquis and the old savant; the ex-barrister; the comely, regal, dark-eyed girl Phaïma, and the handsome, pallid Yankee widow who had come into the room alone. Others were trooping in through the arched doors: the giant dragoons in mail with the heroic remnant of the Black Company—gaunt guerillas of war; and the crowding, jostling archers and men-at-arms.

Prince Hâkon, or in fine, King Hâkon to-day—by the grace of the king-maker and his own strong right arm—who had got what he had plotted for, at last, stood apart in the foreground, leaning on his red sword and watching Ingulf with a strange expression in his eyes.

Did he suspect that Ingulf was the real King of Valkyria? Did Hâkon believe—as I believed—that he was the lineal descendant of Ingulf the Viking?—though I had no proof of it, except the half-meaningless Saga scrawled in the Jotun's treasure-room some six hundred years ago! . . . And did the gallant, but crafty Prince—shrewdly suspecting that Ingulf would never be able to prove his royal birth—stifle his conscience and seal his lips with the ignoble thought that the throne he had got for himself was the gift of Odin and therefore his to keep?

If he did, he was no different from other princes of the earth! At least a royal crown was too strong a bait for him—as the king-maker knew.

De Roquemort knew Hâkon's heart; he had read him through and through. And with the flush of victory in the significant smile he had flashed at me, he turned to the officers of Hâkon's cavalry and raised his sword with a gesture of authority.

"Hail to King Hâkon of Valkyria!" he cried; and the Jotuns cheered wildly.

He had won! . . . He had set his puppet on the throne of Valkyria, and Leopold's dark Protectorate had triumphed over the cause of Cecil Rhodes. With the basic injustice of Leopold's sordid scheme of annexation, he, De Roquemort, did not concern himself. It was not he who must rëenact the horrors of the Congo.

Perhaps he saw, in his mind's eye, the fallen fortunes of his House regenerated by the princely reward Leopold must have offered him, and by his share of the Jotun's hoard. . . . He had taken good care to remove the treasure and see it safely packed in panniers, to be slung one on each of his transport-donkeys; with the jewels which represented so many millions of francs, under his own falcon eyes, and the ingots of gold sewed up in rawhide, ready for the word to march, when the time came. Yet the Marquis de Roquemort was a man of honor. He would divide the treasure fairly. Gold could not bribe him to break his gentleman's code—the same code of his ancestors who had fought under the old Lilies of France. And Leopold, the reader of men, must have won this man with the one bribe that such a man as De Roquemort would accept—a great name.

But I saw the darker side—the other years.

I saw, mentally, the gold-mines of Valkyria worked by a once free race sunk to the level of serfs, and even worse off than they had ever been during the remorseless reign of the Red King—under the pitiless lash of Leopold's mercenaries; under the shadow of a foreign fortress bristling with German guns! And in my heart I knew that his idea was wrong—all wrong! How could I prevent it? To me, in the bitterness of that defeat, the one bright gleam in this hopeless situation was the conviction that I had won the love of Norma, and that

a return to civilization was now a certainty, though I could never face again the empire-builder Cecil Rhodes.

To Sherry the whole thing must have seemed like a glorious romance. He had prevailed upon Alline to marry him . . . one day—when we returned. To Eric Ivarsson, that grotesque and brave old savant, his future fame among men as the greatest living archeologist seemed assured.

To Ingulf, it meant what? No living man knows. He stood watching Hâkon's dark face, with his own as stern and impenetrable as a mask of iron.

Hâkon took the salute with a royal dignity as he advanced to the throne he had won like a Roman Consul, through a sea of blood; raising his red sword in answer to the wild cheers of his officers. Mechanically, with the unconscious gesture of a man perfectly familiar with the rôle he had to play, he half parted the crimson curtains behind the dais to let the sunlight shine in the better on his hour of triumph.

But as he moved the curtains there was the sharp, humming twang of a bowstring. He went reeling back—clutching convulsively at a long arrow buried in his side to the plume, beneath the arm where the corselet joins the mail, and the red blood began to drip down on the white marble for half a dozen tense seconds, like the *tick, tick, tick,* of an invisible clock.

The spectators grew horror-stricken as they saw

a spasm pass over Hâkon's face. He staggered, strove to clutch the ivory throne—but missed it by an inch. Then he sank dying across the corpse of the Red King.

The Pretender had paid in full for the lie he would have lived if he could; but in the racking throes of death, he was to redeem that lie by gasping out the truth. . . . But still the spell held men fast.

Ingulf was the first man to make a move. He leaped past the dying Hâkon and felled the murderer—Agi the tall archer—the blow splitting the bowman to the chin, ere he could draw another arrow to the head. He was dead before he struck the marble floor.

But even before the archer dropped, I had guessed why he had sped that ruthless shaft; and in truth, the deadly motive was not hard to understand. His arrow that struck down the Prince was launched by the human combination of fear and revenge. Fear of that naked sword in Hâkon's hand, which the bowman well knew would strike home in the instant of unavoidable discovery! Revenge for his fallen master, whom Agi had loved in his own wild, wolfish heart, as a boar-hound loves the hand that feeds him.

Well he knew that he had to die, and knew also that Hâkon was the man who gained most surely by the King's downfall. He would have slain the

rest if he could—but Hâkon he hated most of all, and took a dark pride in seeing that he never would rule in the Red King's throne-chair, though he had hidden himself behind the curtains for his own safety. Like the other refugees, Agi had been forced to flee by the human law of self-preservation. He had fled there since he could find no better hiding place; but at the last, he had realized the hopelessness of escape, and his savage impulse of vengeance had mastered all other impulses.

A cry burst from Hâkon's men.

"The King is dead!" But a convulsive movement of the dying Prince Hâkon instantly riveted every eye upon him. With a supreme effort he rolled over on his side, and propping himself up painfully on his mailed elbow, slowly turned his fast-glazing eyes and livid, tortured face upon Ingulf, at whom he managed to point at last a shaking finger.

"No!" he gasped out, "the King *lives!* There is the real king—King Ingulf, son of Ulf the Good—last of the Royal House of Valkyria! The Usurper poisoned his father with the bane in the mead-cup—his mother went mad . . but the boy lived—lived to return—to return . . and to avenge . . . the past!"

A keen shudder ran through his stalwart frame. "I pass! . . ." he murmured vaguely, "to Hela! . . . See to it that he is set—on the throne—of Valkyria—"

Hâkon fell back a corpse.

In the many faces crowding around the dais, I saw a dozen fleeting emotions: amazement, joy, grief, fear and despair, and many other expressions that were indescribable; the most salient one being doubt; as is ever the way where men's motives clash.

And from the Jotuns arose a menacing growl.

"An impostor! A traitor! Who knows? If he is in truth the King let him put it to the proof—or let him die the death!"

And in an instant swords were out and men were crowding around him in a ring of fierce faces. Ingulf's steel-gray eyes flashed fire, and he stepped back, whirling the naked sword in the air.

"I am the King!" quoth Ingulf, in a voice like the peal of an organ—"and Death flies here! . . . Take care!" And up flashed his fatal claymore.

They recoiled. There was proof enough—if men had but known where to find it—in the royal archives and parchments. But hot heads and wild hearts make a short shrift; and blood might have flowed from it, save for the presence of mind of a gray-haired veteran officer of cavalry who had pushed his way to the front of the crowd. The old Jotun—as he was—stepped out from the throng and held up his gnarled hand with a shrewd, humorous chuckle.

"Softly!" quoth he, "King's men and gamecocks all! 'Tis soon put to the proof. If he is the son of Ulf my old master—and by Odin's sword,

I would swear to those hawk's eyes in a thousand!—there will be still on his skin the old scar where I dropt my axe, with the strong mead swimming through my head, at his cradle-side years agone . . . Doff the gauntlet, King, and let us see thine arm!"

For answer, Ingulf drew off the mail gauntlet and tossed it clinking on the marble flags. With a royal gesture he held up his bared arm in the bar of sunlight, and even from where I stood, I could plainly make out the mark of a livid white scar, three inches long, standing out on the firm bronzed skin.

Men craned their heads to look. The old servant of his father, the dead King Ulf, stared with misty eyes. It was enough! As in a wild waking dream, I heard De Roquemort rap out a French oath betwen his teeth, and heard the Valkyrians' deep, thrilling cry—

"Long live King Ingulf of Valkyria!"

Many voices took up that cry, till it went echoing down the crowded corridors. There followed a scene of singular confusion; mingled cries of wonder, joy, triumph, laughter and sorrow; pity for the dead Hâkon; plaudits for the living King Ingulf. But in all this uproar the beautiful Valkyrian girl Phaïma still stood staring motionless and horror-stricken at the contorted features of her ill-starred half-brother, as if she had read in them something the others could not see.

"Dead! . . ." she said mechanically, half to herself. "Dead—in his hour of triumph!—never to

sit upon the throne he won! . . . Lifeless and still, with a cruel arrow driven through his brave heart! —never to throb again!" A smothered sigh burst from Phaïma's ashen lips. "Cold in death!" she quivered, "with his honor unstained by a living lie. May the gods grant him peace. . . ." She swayed slightly, and shuddered, as if some terrible presentiment burned in her dulled and tortured brain. "Ah! Valkyria!" she said, in her rich, deep, broken voice—"so soon to perish and pass away! Fallen! . . . and all her white beauty crumbled to dead and blackened ruins!—deep down in the crystal depths! . . . where the wildfowl wheel and cry above the blue waters that hide forever their mighty secret of Valkyria's fallen greatness!—never to know the light of day again!"

Ingulf started, and caught the girl's arm.

"You are dreaming, fair Queen!"

She looked at him rather wildly. "Queen! You too are dreaming, my lord!" she said coldly. "I am but a slave in the hollow of your royal hand, and not a queen."

"You are my Queen, lady," quoth Ingulf with quiet determination. "I will have no other."

I saw the girl tremble violently and gaze up timidly into his calm, steady gray eyes that seemed to burn down into her thoughts—then her composure broke. A red blush swept across her pale, olive cheeks; and in an instant, the tears were rolling slowly down them.

But Ingulf, with a royal smile lighting up his strong features, very gently took Phaïma's wet cheeks between both his hands, and turned her face up—then deliberately kissed her on the lips.

"'Tis a trick I have learnt from the white Jarls!" quoth he to the girl, half humorously.

The Marquis de Roquemort stood watching them with a diamond-edged smile on his lips. "*Sacre bleu!*" he swore, ironically, "so I have made another king—and he has already found a queen! . . . *Kismet!* . . . as the Arabs say, I win, after all!"

"Not yet!" I retorted crushingly, tapping him with an emphatic finger. "I am Prime Minister now, so you lose. The king-maker must bow to the empire-builder. Leopold came a cropper with Hâkon the Pretender, poor devil! Your machine-guns are silenced. Thank God, if ever another European sets foot in Valkyria it will be under the flag of England and Cecil Rhodes!"

He stared at me with swift comprehension in his eyes, as Ingulf II of Valkyria advanced up the dais to his strangely regained inheritance—hand in hand with the Princess Phaïma. He set her in the ivory throne and stood erect, facing a thunder-storm of applause that rolled through the palace again and again, ere it died away. The girl was smiling and blushing happily now—after the way of a woman. And obviously, the King's union with the last of the Valkyrian royalty touched a popular

chord in the hearts of all factions, for it consolidated the interests of the kingdom.

A red flush burned in De Roquemort's cheek, and for a moment he turned away. When he faced us again, it was by some iron effort of the will that he bowed low, in his grand courtier fashion, to the King he had not meant to make! He stepped closer to me and spoke in a low voice:

"You," he said slowly, "are cleverer than I thought. You have let me fight your battles beautifully to the end! For you I have accommodatingly preserved a distressed lady and unearthed a giant's hoard—if you live to spend it. I have built you a stair of gold to the castle of love! . . . *Et moi,*" he added absently, "what matter if Leopold's coronet must go begging for another crest than mine? . . . Somebody's bubbles will burst! To play out the comedy, there is left a little affair of honor—pistols, was it not?"

I started. He had caught me napping once more! I said stiffly, "As you like, Mr. de Roquemort."

"Shall we say ten minutes after sunset?" he suggested, "behind the fountains in the courtyard? The light will be perfect then."

I nodded. He spun around on his heel with a bow and a set smile on his lips, and walked away inscrutably, through the ring of mystified, cheering men-at-arms—cheering for a king whom most of

them had never seen!—and down the long hall to where the shapely figure of a woman waited for him with a splendid smile, that was perhaps a better reward than any coronet of this world.

It was Mrs. Rountree.

So Leopold had promised him a dukedom as the price of his success! If he had won, he might have been elevated to the dignity of a prince! Sometimes, when I think of how gallantly he fought against inhuman odds, of the high nobility he had shown in a base cause, I have felt sorry that he lost!

King Ingulf II was speaking with the ring of authority in his deep voice.

"Soldiers of Valkyria," he said, "I give you a new law . . . peace and safety! To whomsoever breaks the King's Rede—beware! Prince or pauper, he shall die the death! To the soldiers of the dead Usurper, who fought in ignorance, I give free pardon! And to you, Avar the Thirsty"—and he turned to the veteran officer of cavalry whose presence of mind had quelled the riot—"I give command of my army. See that you become henceforth Avar the Sober, and do the deeds of a man! Now go bury the dead and cleanse the city. But stay!—to the Black Priesthood whose blight has lain long on Valkyria, I decree death—and no quarter! Go! See to it that they are hemmed in and killed and their creed abolished forever!"

Avar bowed low and went about his grim errand.

A murmur of mingled joy, relief, astonishment, and horror, ran around the hall; then silence fell, which King Ingulf broke.

"Guards," quoth he, pointing to the mailed corpse of Hâkon the Pretender, "he who lies dead was a brave and gallant soldier. Bury him like a Prince of Valkyria! But first bury the Usurper as a common felon, and his dead henchman with him. Take them away!"

The hall was cleared. We watched the somewhat awed assemblage breaking up; and from the windows overlooking the square, saw King Ingulf's couriers riding out swiftly from the city's gates, bearing to the Northern Province the news that Prince Hâkon was dead with the Red King, and the House of Ulf was strangely restored to the throne of Valkyria.

Then I advanced to the dais with Sherry and the old savant, Eric Ivarsson.

"Long live King Ingulf II!" I said.

"Aye," quoth Ingulf, "King by an inch!"

"And every inch a king!" I threw in readily.

He laughed like a Viking in a Saga.

"You shall have the Jotun's hoard for that word. I will remember what you have done, Jarls. And I will not forget the little game-cock of the Black Company! In Valkyria, one day, men will tell to their children how he and his held the Keep against the Red King's army."

And he turned away.

A woman's voice behind me said, in a tone of relief:

"Alan! Thank God, you are safe!" and I knew it was Norma's voice. She caught my arm, as she came up breathlessly through the dispersing crowd of soldiers and budding courtiers. I gazed at her startled face with vague dismay. I had recalled suddenly De Roquemort's inexorable words: "To play out the comedy, there is left a little affair of honor!" and read in her frightened eyes, whose big dark pupils were widely dilated, that she had already guessed the truth! She had overheard . . . or had her woman's instinct divined?

She gave one look in my face, and her own blanched swiftly.

"Tell me," she quivered, "is it *true,* Alan? You are going to fight a duel with that man? If you love me, tell me the truth!"

"Come with me, Norma," I said mechanically. "This is no place for you."

We went into one of the marble ante-rooms alone —the room where I awoke to see the Royal Guards annihilated by De Roquemort's guns on the great stair.

My first words to her were:

"Who has told you this? Not the Marquis! He is a 'fine gentleman'; it is not his way. As for me, I would have spared you this suspense till it was all over."

"No!" she stammered, "not the Marquis. I

overheard. . . . I saw him leave Mrs. Rountree for a moment and drop back to say to the black-bearded Portuguese audibly, 'A duel at sunset with the Englishman. . . . Pistols—have them loaded!' . . . Then he rejoined her and they went out arm-in-arm. Merciful heaven!—she does not know! . . . and she loves him! But oh, Alan, surely you will give up this senseless duel? Surely you need not fight that brave man for the futile chimera men call honor!"

But I bowed my head silently. A moment afterward, I pronounced:

"It is the only way."

Norma swayed suddenly, and turned white as the marble walls.

"Alan!" she gasped. "You shall not do this mad, wicked, reckless thing! That man is desperate and undone. The iron has pierced his soul. He has saved all our lives a hundred times—and this is his reward, to lose through his own nobility all that he has fought for, and all but grasped. No!" she said shuddering. "Abandon your purpose itself first, Alan, and let us go back, you and I, to England—somewhere . . . and forget it all!"

Her words pierced my heart; rang in my brain. They had a tremendous appeal, the sure conviction that we *could* go back; back to England, or to America; rich with the Jotun's treasure, and richer still in love—we two—and let the mad world wag on

in Africa in its own blind, futile fashion, as it probably would do after all!

Would I have decided differently if I had it all to live over again?

Yes—and no. For all that Norma has been to me, it was not her strength, woman's beauty of body and soul that must have mastered even conscience and sent honor flying to the four winds; it was her weakness! And yet to break the heart of the Empire-builder? No.

All the dogged will of the Devonshire breed burst through the thin crust of the gentleman-lover.

"You are wrong, my girl," I said to her, in a swift-flowing torrent of words. "You don't see. . . . Back of it all, big destinies are working—race against race; civilization against slavery in its most hideous shape; the cause of England and Cecil Rhodes against the Black Protectorate! . . . No you don't realize it all, Norma! This is the real reckoning. Once for all, to-day settles that fight—and fight the Frenchman I will!"

Norma burst into tears. But she was beaten, and she knew it. She had met, for the first time in her life, one of the few terrible problems of this world which a woman's beauty cannot conquer nor a woman's wit turn aside!

Down in the white courtyard, which had been cleared of the dead, and the desecrating crimson stains washed away into the thirsty earth, I could see two familiar figures strolling slowly past the clear

flashing fountains, under the blue African sky; and both heads were nodding very close together—the raven-haired and the gray. They were the French soldier of fortune and the Yankee widow who did not know.

CHAPTER XXVI

ONE OF THE LEGION OF HONOR

KING INGULF II of Valkyria had a royal wedding at midday, and Hâkon the Pretender a royal burial when the red sun sank. The beautiful Phaïma blushed and laughed at the wedding, and well nigh cried her pretty eyes out at the funeral—being a woman, and torn between love and sorrow. She had what the press paragraphers describe as "an emotional day."

At high noon, in the white palace of the Valkyrian kings, I had been imperiously summoned to the throne-room, where I found my ex-henchman, with Phaïma, my fellow-adventurers, and a numerous concourse of people waiting impatiently; and with them a white-haired servant of Odin: half poet-bard and the other half pagan priest. He had appeared from some musty corner of Valkyria—much as a solitary bloom of the vivid wild gorse sometimes thrusts up its lonely head to the sun amid the pallid fungus-growth of the fens. He had stalked out from enforced seclusion, as soon as he had learned the news of the fall of the Black Priesthood and the restoration of the House of Ulf.

In an aged, metallic monotone, with barbarian

gestures a thousand years old, the priest began droning out into his white, long beard, that would have done for a Druid in a Tragedy, the few simple words which linked that royal pair. At the very last instant, by a curiously human oversight, it was found that the bridal couple lacked a ring, and even that ancient bard was helpless!

So the Kentucky widow, Mrs. Rountree, contributed a shining golden band—a wedding ring she seemed glad to give away—smiling slightly into the falcon eyes of the Marquis de Roquemort with a significance which could not be mistaken. Presently the wedding-cup went round the hall; the concourse broke up, having cheered till the great room echoed to the roof with their applauding voices. Clearly, King Ingulf's first royal act had been both politic and popular.

Norma stood watching this extraordinary scene; her face pale and distraught, as if with a vague prevision of coming evil. She seemed sunk in dreams as Sherry and Alline came up to us, arm-in-arm.

"How perfectly glorious!" the Southern girl purred rapturously. "All this—in the nineteenth century! To think that your mad Viking has turned out to be a savage King! And to think that all the while, he has been making effective love to a semi-barbaric Queen! What a hit it will all make in 'Persons I Have Met'!"

Here Sherry groaned abysmally, but was crushingly snubbed. Alline was bubbling gaily.

"My memoirs, Mr. Severn, can be safely booked for a 'Best Seller.' They will run into many editions and be translated into correct Londonese, and Billingsgate-and-Scotch. Tragedy, pathos, satire—and scuttlefuls of gore!"

She cast a look of witheringly sweet scorn upon the enamored Sherry, who was attempting feebly to put in: "But—er—we are going to be married first, you know, before you write them!" Then she continued calmly.

"Dr. Eric Ivarsson is a perfect brick. He has actually consented to write the preface, and sign it with nearly all of the alphabet after his name. And the reviewers will all say: 'A new and fascinating volume of African adventures from the pen of the well-known globe-trotter, Miss Alline Buckerton, of Covington, Ky., U. S. A. Marooned in an extinct crater in Central Africa, with the late expedition of the Marquis de Roquemort, this determined young woman——'"

"Too dashed determined," groaned Sherry, but the girl paid no heed. She had checked herself, suddenly catching sight of Norma's tortured face. It was ashen, and the English girl was swaying as if with a vertigo.

"Forgive me!" Alline exclaimed, and caught swiftly at her arm. "You are ill, Norma—I did not know. Come away at once. A glass of wine——"

Norma gathered herself together and followed

quietly, as if dazed. At the door of the room, she turned back and gave me from the shadow a long, silent look that went to my heart. Then she passed out.

Sherry stared at me. But I drew him aside into the almost deserted corridor. The crowd of courtiers had swooped down upon the wedding feast.

"Steady, my boy," I said quietly. "I have got a bit of ill news to break."

And in a dozen words I told him of the duel. He whistled below his breath.

"So the Frenchman means to play trumps to the bitter end," he said. "Well, he has a perilous reputation. You remember what Rhodes said, 'A ruined gamester with the devil's courage!' I am afraid it is too late to mend a cast shoe, Alan. You must be quick as lightning and cool as steel—or he will kill you!"

"In which case," I said in a steady voice, "I shall make you my heir, as my sole kinsman." He shuddered.

"One thing more," and I handed him a long envelope bearing the seal of Cecil Rhodes, which I had carried for so many months. "I commit these papers into your hands. You are aware what they contain. If I die, you are to take any steps deemed best by yourself and Dr. Eric Ivarsson, in behalf of England. If I live, there will be no need of Treaties till another day."

"Keep a stiff upper lip, old chap," he said, and

went away with the Grants in his hand to look for the Doctor.

I turned back to the throne-room and joined the gay, boisterous throng of feasters. Come what would, I was determined to carry the affair off coolly, without heroics. Yet my brain was buzzing with dark thoughts, as I went in and sat down at the banquet board, as I had sat, upon a day, at the Red King's trenchers, nodding stiffly to the man across the table—De Roquemort!

To hide my surprise, I poured out a goblet of the strong red wine and was about to raise it to my lips when his gesture arrested me in the act.

"In your shoes, Captain Severn," said the Marquis, meaningly, "I would not drink that wine. It is far too strong for a steady nerve." He paused absently. "But as you English fire-eaters have no nerves to unstring—permit me to drink with you, to our little *coup de main* at sunset!"

He drank on his feet, bowed blandly and walked away strollingly, his heel-taps dying out like a drum-roll.

I gazed at his receding military back—puzzled. He had given me some good advice, with the odd and exalted foreign chivalry of his incomprehensible character. He would take no advantage: if I drank, so would he! Yet he meant to kill me. He was gone. I began to eat some food mechanically, taking his hint about the wine.

At last I looked at my watch. It was three o'clock. Only three hours more, perhaps, of life! It was a weird, new sensation. I had discovered how condemned men would feel in their last hours on earth.

Time is a thing that either gallops or crawls, as a man's mind happens to be full or empty. Mine was abrim; so time set a reeling steeplechase to the sunset. Those last hours staggered by like dreams. There was not time enough to live them in! For the first and last time in my life, I steered clear of Norma. I wanted to keep my fighting nerve. So I had wisely resolved not to risk again that uncomfortable battery of her accusing eyes.

Framed in the tall doorway beyond, I caught sight of Sherry again, and old Eric Ivarsson. They paused and held a muttered exchange of words, jerking their thumbs toward me. A moment after, I saw them beckon. Then a diversion occurred. The King stood up and there was a general movement of the crowd to the doors, which we followed.

Presently I was standing with bared head in the gaping crowd at Prince Hâkon's burial, with King Ingulf II and a curious company of fawning courtiers, who, as is the way of man, now worshiped the new star that had arisen in their barbaric heaven. They had opened an enormous man-hole in the limestone courtyard, many feet out from the stair. A garrulous, aged bystander informed me that all of

the Valkyrian kings lay buried there, under the giant Keep they had reared.

In the fading sun-blaze, I saw a body wrapped in a glittering sheet of lead being received by shadowy hands upstretched out of the hole. Then I heard a single pealing volley fired by all that was left of the Black Company over Hâkon's grim grave. That was Raoul de Roquemort's final tribute to the Pretender's heart of oak. . . .

Ten minutes after, the courtyard was empty—all save four who waited until the crowd had melted away.

Of these four, I was one. The other three were De Roquemort, Sherry and the dark-faced Portuguese, who came up carrying a black morocco pistol-case under his arm. It had a silver clasp with the monogram of the Marquis; it looked as though it had played a part in other duels, in what lands and in what *affaires d'honneur,* I had no idea.

"Shall we say fifteen paces apart?" I heard Sherry say to the Portuguese adventurer.

The Marquis was standing a few feet away and out of ear-shot. He paid no attention, seeming sunk in reveries.

"The right distance, Señor," was the reply. "These pistols throw a shade high."

He approached me with the black case open.

"Take your choice, Señor Severn," he said courteously.

As in a dream, I noted that the two gleaming things on black plush looked very handsome and very deadly. Both were pearl-mounted, exactly alike, and apparently of foreign make, for they had a peculiar upward hook to the inside of the grip to afford a better hand-hold.

Coolly enough, remembering that it is ever the fashion of Englishmen to play the man best at the last, I weighed one of the weapons in my hand, absently admiring its beautiful poise and balance. Then I put it back.

"No, Mr. Torres," I said, "I prefer my own—a Colt's." And I took it out of its holster and threw the cylinder, making certain that it was loaded in all six chambers.

"Then place your man," he said to Sherry. "Now—while the light is good."

The Marquis turned around, with an abrupt, foreign gesture. His face was a singular study.

"Captain Severn," he threw in, "before we proceed, I have a word to say. I regret that this must be the end. . . . Under other circumstances, I should avoid this quarrel with a brave gentleman whose point of view I cannot in honor recognize. You will recall perfectly my position? . . . Destiny, not Raoul de Roquemort, arranges all the pieces to-day and sweeps the board!"

I said, "Valkyria will not hold us both, Raoul."

"So," he went on evenly, "one of us takes a trip through the Dark Gates!—the other goes back to

the world, to fame and wealth of a Monte Cristo. If you are the unlucky one, I offer you the oath of a De Roquemort that your share of the Viking's gold shall go to your heirs, untouched. *Voila!* it is well packed, that gold, Monsieur, and all those jewels, to guard against an accident. . . . If I fall, *mon ami,* you will be so good as to make over my part of the treasure to *la tres belle Americaine,* Mrs. R-r-r-rountree."

He added, smiling mirthlessly:

"Come, I trust you, *beau sire,* and your English face has written on it that you trust me. Let us get it over." He selected a pistol at random from the case. "We will fire together at the count of three."

The sun was going down. Never yet, I thought, had its mellow rays shone on a madder sight than this mad duel for a lost land. Then at the metal-lipped hail from the Portuguese, "In your places, gentlemen? . . . Read*ee!*" I stiffened instinctively and brought down my weapon steadily with an arm set like steel, until the barrel covered an ornament pinned with a bit of red ribbon on the Frenchman's breast, that gleamed in the sun rays.

Instantaneously I guessed that it was the Cross of the Legion of Honor, which he had earned, God knows by what gallant deed of bravery or on what desperate field, and wore for the first time I had seen it—fully aware of the danger he ran by having so conspicuous a mark pinned on his coat; but pre-

ferring to die with it, if he had to die, under that immortal symbol of France.

The voice of the Portuguese blared out:

"One!"

My barrel came to a dead rest on the fiery Cross.

"Two!"

I say it with genuine remorse, and with no wish to boast, I was a dead shot and certain that I had him—when a new voice roared:

"Gentlemen, you are under arrest. On the charge of breaking the King's Peace!"

At the same instant the hand of old Eric Ivarsson struck up my pistol and a line of armed guards filed into the courtyard from the doors at the side of the stair-foot. Behind the guards I saw my one-time retainer, Ingulf the King; his stern face now dark with wrath. I was disarmed.

"Guards," said the King ominously, "put those four men in irons. They are mad to brawl here in the palace yard on my wedding-eve! Though they be Jarls of Valkyria, they shall learn that I rule here, and what it is to break the King's Rede!"

I was crestfallen. A brace of burly archers took charge of me, and their comrades laid rough hands on Sherry. The Marquis gave up his pistol in bitter silence and submitted, his head sunk forward slightly on his chest in thought. Had he resisted, a dozen shafts might have found their mark. The Valkyrians held life cheap. The King's word was law.

Eric abruptly glued his watery, cold gray eye on me.

"A more serious charge than you think," he said *sotto voce,* and my face fell as I harked to him. "My dear Severn! Kings are kings, you know, all the world over. You'll be lucky if you can come out of this mess with a whole skin. Nothing short of exile. . . . You can't do this sort of thing in a king's front yard——"

He never finished the rest. A ghastly-looking figure of a man came lurching and reeling through the broken gates and staggered across the courtyard like a man drunken or spent—a man whose red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes, haunted by Fear, and palsied features I had difficulty in recognizing as the lineaments of him who had once been Avar the Thirsty and had become in a day Avar the Sober, general of the Valkyrian army.

He strove painfully to speak, but no articulate or coherent words issued from his dry lips—only senseless mouthings, like the gibberings of an ape.

"Speak out, man!" cried King Ingulf. "What ails thee?"

"By the Hound of Hrymir! O King!" he gasped out at last. "Flee swiftly, with those that are dear to thee! . . . .Valkyria is fallen! . . . Aye, the accursed priests have fired the reservoirs, and from a hundred earth-caves the fires of Hela have leapt forth! . . . *Look!*"

He pointed, shuddering, to the Square below.

A terrific, roaring sheet of awful flame rose suddenly, almost to the dusky, twilight sky. It lit up weirdly for one breathless flash of time the gigantic bronze figure of the sculptured Philosopher in the Square, till it stood out brilliantly in bold relief against the white line of noble colonnades and majestic fanes beyond, like some superhuman Genie clothed in a spectral halo not of earth.

There was a dull, shattering explosion—a rending roar of upheaved masonry . . . and the statue fell, to disappear forever into a yawning chasm of hissing flames. Over the spot where the Colossus had fallen, drifted sullenly a trailing fleet of murky, sulphurous smoke-wreaths that swirled lower and lower, down, down, over it all, like monstrous vultures from the next world closing on their prey.

Then with a yell like a lost soul—beating his breast in frenzied haste as if his lungs were bursting for air—Avar the Jotun turned toward us his convulsed face, over which a ghastly, greenish pallor was swiftly creeping, and lurched to the King's feet —a corpse.

For an instant, every man there stood petrified with horror. Then the appalled guards released us and made a frantic rush for the gates, each bent solely upon saving himself in the general catastrophe. There was no longer heed among them for the authority of kings or gods, the instinct of self-preservation was strongest of all.

We were free. They fought like madmen for

escape at the narrrow stone arch, trampling one another underfoot in their wolfish haste. Then the courtyard was empty but for ourselves, the King, and half a dozen of his officers who had stood their ground.

Señor Torres, in his dismay, dropped the pistol-case at my feet and fled stumbling in the falling dusk to the barracks where the Arabs were quartered, but they needed no arousing. They were already swarming out like a hunting-pack from their kennels, as men do who have learned to meet and grapple the unforeseen. But they were bewildered, awed, by that unholy glare out of the tropic dusk.

De Roquemort retained his iron composure. He wheeled and rapped out a curt command to El Zanek, the Arab, who had suddenly appeared as if from the earth. Then he dashed up the shadowy stair.

That old man remained cool as ice, though the fires of avarice inside him were fierce as the hungry flames. He yelped to his scattered pack, and they heeded him, even then. In a trice they fell to work at his bidding, looking like black gnomes from the under-world in the crimson reflection from the sky, against which their gaunt figures stood out plainly.

Looking back once from the top of the great stair as I rushed after Ingulf and the Valkyrian officers, that brief, wild vision of the luridly lit courtyard, the Arabs, and the burning, smoke-wreathed city below, was photographed upon my memory forever.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FALL OF VALKYRIA

ALL that, you will understand, got under way, transpired and ended in half a dozen breathless minutes; though it seems long enough in the telling. Afterward, I found that while their invincible Giaour was inside, the Arabs had stoically continued loading the Maxims on two of the string of transport donkeys, which they had led out coolly from the palace stables; burdening the others with the wicker panniers and rawhide bags which contained the Jotun's treasure.

Deus ex machina! . . . The Giaour's mastery of men and his almost hypnotic vigilance; his military tactics of providing a retreat behind every advance, which was a part of his soldier's genius and of his graphic imagination, had triumphed once more, even in the face of a cataclysm which could destroy a city.

As for me, my first thought had been for Norma.

Stopping only an instant to pick up the pistol which Señor Torres had cast away in his fright—for I realized the value of such a weapon in a crisis where men might turn to wild beasts, I had followed De Roquemort into the palace, which was plunged

in shadow. I dashed straight to Norma's room, whose location I knew as well as I knew the ground plan of my own rooms in the long stone wing of Frau Van Salm's rambling old house in far-away Johannesburg.

Bursting into the room, I saw a knot of huddled white figures staring from the windows down at the burning city, over which a gigantic trail of smoke from the awakening volcano was rolling sullenly, with a blood-red glow of flame in its heart. Into the shadowy room great flakes of calcined ashes were drifting slowly. I felt them upon my fingers—and I *understood!*

The slumbering Titan in the crater, shaken from sleep by the terrific subterranean gas explosions, had come to life at last! The volcano was sending out its silent advance-guard of ruin. From the distance, I heard the crash of falling buildings, toppling one after another to utter destruction, as the crackling flames burst out from their foundations, lapping pitilessly around the stately, fallen fanes and broken pillars, and leaping right up to the dark sky. Then a blood-freezing sound, like the death-cries uttered by countless voices, was borne back faintly to my ears from the doomed city.

A woman screamed. Then from the knot of frightened figures by the window, Norma's pale face emerged.

"Alan!" she said, "thank God, you are not dead!"

In a moment, I had her in my arms. But only for a moment; for in the next, De Roquemort was in the room, followed by Sherry and the King himself.

"Get what you must have, Norma," I said, "and prepare yourself for a journey. The city is doomed. Be swift!"

Phaïma glided from the shadows. She put her white arms around Ingulf's great shoulders, with a gesture remarkable for its unutterable love and despair.

"Valkyria is fallen, my King!" she said brokenly. "Perhaps you will forget Phaïma and go back with the white Jarls to a world where this one will seem like a horrible vision . . . a dream that never was!"

But Ingulf spoke out royally. "Nay, Phaïma, that will I not. Never will I desert my people in the hour of misfortune—the white Jarls go back alone! One day, a new Valkyria shall kiss the sun, and above it the Valkyries shall wheel their pale horses as of old . . . but not here! . . . Come, away with me, my Queen! to safety—while there is time to flee."

In the doorway appeared old Eric Ivarsson's warped features against the ruddy glare from the windows.

"Away!" he mumbled. "Quick!—I have got gear and guns!"

Getting clear of the palace, we found a disordered

mob of archers, courtiers and king's scullions huddled in the courtyard, kept at bay by the menacing, yellow face of El Zanek, who held the gateway with a drawn saber, as the Arabs heaved up their packs. With true Arab cunning, he had provisioned them warily for a fortnight's march with cold venison and dried dates. He had seen to the Giaour's dunnage, even to the petrol lamps. As for loot, they had already swept through the palace like Attila's Huns; but woman-like, Phaïma had saved the crown jewels of Valkyria, days before.

"Trek!"

To the old cry, we began the maddest march that ever the Valkyrian stars shone down upon. Our long cavalcade—the scared women grouped with the royal attendants behind our vanguard—filed across the deserted drawbridge, whose warders had fled long since. The water had risen for some strange reason, as I marked, and was lapping and gurgling madly over the trembling timbers of the bridge. Steering wide of the ruined Square, where the flames were now leaping almost to the shadowy sky, we plunged into a narrow side-thoroughfare that was little more than a footpath used mostly by wine-sellers and fruit-vendors from the quays.

It brought us out at last upon the dim embankment of the canal. Here, too, I noticed that the water was rising mysteriously; it was already within nine inches of the low stone bank, and from it issued an ominous, bubbling, sucking sound whose cause

I was at a loss to comprehend. The canal here had been generally half choked by all the sluggish sewage that it collected from the long southern slopes of the city, before it turned off under a great white aqueduct set level with the streets, to discharge its foul dark tide into the broad river which broke through the eastern wall of the crater. The river was the only outlet from the blue lake lying north of the city, whose ten-mile-long expanse of deep water was hidden from our eyes by the darkness. There seemed to be a great commotion in that quarter, though we had no inkling of what was happening. Then, vividly, Phaïma's wild words re-echoed ominously in my memory, word for word.

"Valkyria!" her horror-stricken, haunting voice had said—"So soon to perish and pass away! Fallen! . . . and all her white beauty crumbled to dead and blackened ruins!—deep down in the crystal depths! . . . where the wildfowl wheel and cry above the blue waters that hide forever their mighty secret of Valkyria's fallen greatness!—never to know the light of day again!"

What did the girl mean?

Did she guess that one day, the giant forces of the earth would awake and overwhelm Valkyria? Did she know that the crater was but asleep?

With the volcano feeding the gas-mains which honeycombed the whole city, how easy it was for a malignant mind to cause the destruction of Val-

kyria! How simple a thing it was to break through the artificial crust of masonry—to cast down in those depths one blazing torch and light the fires of Hell! . . . When that thin line of embankments, which, like the dykes of the Scheldt in Holland, chained the river in its bed, was once undermined by fire, it would crumble like cardboard and let loose the waters of the lake upon the doomed city. Fire and flood! What a fearful foe either was alone, what a terrible pair together.

Amid the dull crash of toppling structures and the loud crackling roar of the leaping flames, we reached the wide causeway leading to the aqueduct and hurried across it toward the city's gates, now not more than two hundred yards beyond. But as we gained the highest part of the bridge, I paused for breath and looked back.

A shadowy, tall figure enveloped in a long priest's robe appeared, running with great bounds down the main artery from the Square. Almost at his heels sped a soldier with drawn sword. His mail cuirass and upraised weapon caught the red flash of the flames—it was one of the King's officers who pursued the priest like Fate, recognizing the author of Valkyria's fall and grimly bent on fulfilling Ingulf's order, even in the hour of destruction.

On came the hunted priest, till barely twenty yards separated him from the white causeway; and as he came nearer, the flames flared up brilliantly all around him, and I recognized his ghastly face and

skeleton figure—it was the Arch Priest Fangari.* Under the influence of revenge and despair he had fired the huge gas-reservoirs in the Square; but the effect had been too swift and appalling for even his dark genius to outwit. His own mad act had cut him off from escape.

On he came, on, on—with the tall figure of the Valkyrian officer rushing behind him like Nemesis; on—until I could see his convulsed face plainly in the glare of the flames.

But he never reached the aqueduct. Just in front of him a frightful sheet of fire abruptly shot up to the sky. The stone pavement crumbled beneath his feet, there was a muffled explosion, and with a scream that rang discordantly in my memory long afterwards, he vanished. He had fallen into that fiery furnace of his own setting, and that was the end of him.

Then the sullen smoke-canopy rolled down again, and the long, ghostly wreaths of ashes and vapor drifted between, and I never knew the fate of the soldier. Perhaps he perished with the priest. Holding Norma by the hand in the darkness, I stumbled on mechanically behind the spectral forms of the donkeys and horses and the shadowy shapes of the Arabs. Presently we had passed out of the

* Note by Sir Alan Severn, F.R.G.S.—Fangari is an old Norse name in the Iceland Sagas.—A. S. The reader may examine other names in the narrative in the white light of Etymology. They will be found to have a Scandinavian origin, though they sound African.—EDITOR.

silent, deserted gates, which were wide ajar, and reached the higher level of the roadway winding up to the dim line of the cliff-wall. Our fleeing cavalcade had joined the endless stream of refugees from the burning city, where many thousands of its inhabitants had been crushed in the ruins of their falling houses, or suffocated in that earthly Inferno they had lived above so long. I was witnessing the Exodus of a people; but only the pitiful remnant, for Valkyria had been as populous as the old-world cities by the Euphrates. Phaïma's strange prophecy had come true.

From the lofty roadway I turned and gazed back at the desolated city. It was the last time I ever saw Valkyria. I saw, through the blood-red glow of wildly tossing flames the dim, Titanic outlines of the great fortress still looming tall and ghostly at the city's blazing heart; but flames were bursting out at last under its massive foundations, and the palace of the Valkyrian kings would never kiss the sunrise. Behind me like a shadow King Ingulf was gazing back stonily.

"It is doomed," he said hoarsely, "and I am homeless! . . . Once more I am 'Ingulf the Wanderer!' Valkyria is fallen forever! Well, Jarl, I won it for a day!—and by Odin's sword, I am still the King! You return alone, Baas. I stay here with my fallen race. Forget those rough words of mine ere I stopped the brawl in the court. I said them but to save your life and that of the little game-

cock from overseas, whom I loved for his lion heart. Think of Ingulf the Viking sometimes, my gallant English friend. . . . Farewell!"

I wrung his mailed hand and turned away.

He was gone. In the distance, I fancied I could see a long white wall of water rushing down upon the fallen city. The deep waters of the lake, freed by the volcanic convulsions, were rapidly closing over its ruins with a sullen roar like some antediluvian monster devouring its prey. In the darkness, affrighted clouds of wildfowl were already wheeling and hovering over its site, which was being turned into an immense swamp; and explorers would find no trace of the once mighty city, beyond a few colossal ruins higher up on the flank of the mountain. The old master-artisans who had conceived the city in the crater and invented the means of lighting it were all dead; and Valkyria, like Babylon, Ninevah and Carthage, had fallen and passed away from the face of the earth.

All those dim glimpses of Fate and bitter thoughts passed like some dark fantasmagoria. I was trying to make Norma understand that we were safe. I had, too, the necessity of supporting her trembling form; of consoling her at the parting with Phaïma, who was sobbing out her heart. And when De Roquemort came up and tapped me on the shoulder, I was startled and shaken.

His expression was changed. Somehow his face

looked strangely friendly, in the glow of the petrol lamp he held in his hand. Suddenly he set it down. I was astounded to see him smile buoyantly, and offer me his hand. His eyes were brilliant, yet almost sad. I think that in the destruction of Hâkon in his hour of triumph, he had perceived the finger of God. In his keen, clever way, he had perhaps weighed those considerations; and though he would never admit defeat, his code of life had been lived up to. He had succeeded so far as Man may oppose the will of the Almighty.

"Always," he said, as our clasp met, "your England has won from the world. *Helas!* . . . It is Destiny, so we need not quarrel, you and I. We are friends, I hope, until death. Sacred name of a coachman, my friend, but there is nothing left to wrangle over!"

There was nothing, he was right. There was not even anything to annex. The cataclysm had wiped the slate clean, and in this again, Raoul de Roquemort, the adventurer who had never acknowledged a force superior to his own hands and brain, perceived the finger of God. Of his brave Black Company, barely enough remained to form a safe escort, and to get the treasure out to the coast. To him, the fall of Valkyria brought neither success nor defeat. To Ingulf, it meant a reversion to primitive conditions.

We began to ascend the roadway to the cliffs,

waving a final farewell to the sea of straining faces, among whom Ingulf's gigantic figure stood motionless, gazing back at the crimson glare on the sky.

Climbing to the top of the roadway, just as dawn was breaking, we made the discovery that some frightful subterranean explosion of gas, as the volcano "back-fired," had made a huge gap in the cliff. There was no longer any need to brave the horrors of the passage through the crater's wall, for the road lay open, though it was not a road that any sane being would care to travel twice.

The fearful force of the explosion had blown a tremendous chasm in the cliff-wall. Thousands of feet down its blackened sides there glowed and glimmered dreadfully like an enormous ruby eye, a lake of molten fire, whose awful brink was not more than half a dozen yards in a lateral direction from the narrow ledge of riven rock which we must follow to pass across to the comparatively safe lava-slopes beyond.

There was no semblance left of the devilish, weird skull-face; it had vanished as if its portent had been fulfilled. But strewn all over the basalt rocks we found a very curious collection of human bones thrown up from the Pit; and among them the gigantic skeleton of an Ape-man, calcined clean by the volcanic gas—the sight of which made Dr. Ivarsson's face suddenly blanch to a sickly gray.

He stood staring down at that uncanny Thing in silence for a full minute.

"Ape-man or Troglodyte," he said solemnly, "God knows what it was, and Nature has cast it off. What use to draw an analogy between that extraordinary skeleton and the remains existing of the Neanderthal Man of a past age? Yet that flat, monstrous skull is the same.

"The many marks of teeth on those *human* bones point to one of the great carnivora—Man; for the anthropoid ape is a vegetarian. But as we cannot take that Thing back to the world, in our extremity, it is idle to talk of a theory open to question. The skeleton may belong to another Period. Or it may have been a gorilla, introduced deliberately by the priests, by way of a personal devil in their earthly hell. The huge apes of Africa roam over a vast range. Again, those bones may have been gnawed by jackals, which had some way of getting into the Pit. But as for me, I do not believe it." He paused. "There is the Horror that haunted poor Ibrahim . . . a Horror such as the world never saw."

Shuddering, we turned away and started across the cliff, leading the unwilling beasts and slowly threading our way around the ragged brink of that appalling chasm. An hour later we were safely over the cliff-wall, and halted on the sloping field of lava-clinker to eat breakfast.

Then we trekked.

The Jotun's treasure kept on taking its long toll of human lives. To tell of our long and perilous march to the coast seems quite useless here. After many weeks of forced marches we arrived at Shirati, in German East Africa, on the shores of Lake Victoria. Except for losing four of the Black Company from fever; three more who straggled unwisely in the course of a running fight with the Nandi tribe; and two others while fording a broad, deep river swollen by the tropic rains, where one of the donkeys, laden with two of the great golden basins was also swept away by the swift current and lost with its precious burden, we reached Shirati without mishap to the Europeans in our company. But of the sixty Swahilis who had trekked with De Roquemort from Beira, there remained nine haggard-faced men; all steel nerve and sinew; the survival of the fittest.

At Shirati, we had the good luck to fall in with my old acquaintance, Rupert of Pless; that Austrian Prince who had trekked with me in the old days to the Victoria Falls. After two years of intrigue in the Tyrol and the Balkan States, and another of pursuing the pretty fire-flies of Vienna and Berlin, he had finally come back to Africa to glut once more his wild, ancient Goth-lust for peril.

But he was still the same jovial sybarite surrounded by a numerous and cringing *safari;* and he received us hospitably, putting at our disposal his big Cuxhaven-built steam-launch. We ran down

the lake in her and trekked well provisioned for Nairobi, some three hundred and forty miles inland from Mombasa.

In the middle of January we arrived at Mombasa. There were the same three rounded peaks looming inland; the coral reef that divided Kilindini's opal tideway from the old harbor at English Point; the grim Portuguese-Arab fort, with its rusted, dismantled guns.

We had come back, miraculously saved, to the Land of Promise. With Norma I climbed into one of the yellow man-powered "gharry-cars" of the two-foot, toy street-railway and made straight for the Mombasa Club, where we looked up the Club time-tables for the first steamer sailing the Indian Ocean, bound for Lorenzo Marquez.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ENGLAND

DOWN the Indian Ocean we had steamed, day after day, to the east coast ports; and at Lorenzo Marquez we took the new Delagoa Railway to Johannesburg, where we were welcomed incredulously as those come back from the dead. At once, we were laid siege to by an insistent flying squad of curious reporters from both the *Star* and *Diggers' News,* to whom Sherry dictated in his best barristerial manner a graphic tale of adventures and heroic hardships; but never a word about the lost and fallen city of Valkyria.

At a new and exorbitant hotel in the great gold town we left our fellow travelers waiting while we went to make our peace with Raylescroft, who had given up his daughter for lost, as we had learned from mutual acquaintances—a piece of intelligence which brought a sudden mist of tears to Norma's eyes. Then the Krugersdorp road at last, and the familiar big gray house on the hill. We rode up together through the silent avenue of trees, wondering why no Kaffirs came from the stables to care for our foaming horses. We were very quiet. Our thoughts were too full for speech. We had

come back from the lost to tell old Raylescroft why Norma could never marry Lord Chalmes, and why she had brought back, instead of his debonair lordship, the fameless adventurer Alan Severn—and of the gold which Alan Severn had brought back; greater than all the gold that had built the House of Raylescroft.

But we found a silent, seemingly deserted house, with its army of servants fled; gone as if from the plague, and in that house one old Boer housecarl who was too old and lame to run away. And then in silence he led us to the room that had been Raylescroft's library and showed us what was sitting there in a huge oaken chair, and why it sat so still. Then the old housecarl tiptoed through the door where the dust had settled thick across the massive lintel.

Norma gave one look at the dead man and swooned. It was her father. Raylescroft had been dead for hours.

As to me, I had more curiosity. After calling back the aged Boer, and with his assistance loosening the lace around her white throat and chafing her cold, limp hands between us, until I saw the color coming back faintly into her pallid cheeks, I made Norma comfortable upon a couch.

Then I turned to look at what was in the dead man's hand, held fast in the clutch of his stiff, cramped fingers—a watermarked list of stocks in the Gold Exchange; which stocks I knew from of old were "wild-cat scrip" not worth altogether a

Boer kroner; much less so many thousands of English pounds sterling as I could see jotted opposite each stock in that list of insecure "securities!" By him on the dusty floor a yellowed paper arrested my eye. I picked it up; it was a mortgage memorandum upon the House of Raylescroft, giving the date of foreclosure—to-morrow. And then I knew what had killed Raylescroft . . . apoplexy.

He had speculated in the mushroom scrip of the Rand till he had lost every penny. He had been speculating, I knew, for years secretly, until he had sold himself in the body and ended by mortgaging his soul to the men who bought and sold the ever-changing scrip of the Rand gold mines. So many of them had gone the way of "Severn's Folly," until Cecil Rhodes had come with his strange offer of £5,000 down on the nail. I wondered what he had ever done to get back five thousand pounds; for men said that Cecil Rhodes had never made an investment which did not pay him well. But Rhodes was in England, I had learned.

So I understood at last why old Raylescroft had been so set upon having his daughter marry the rich young Peer who had stayed behind in Valkyria . . . or what had once been Valkyria.

And then Norma opened her wide, startled eyes, with the strained, dazed look in them, like the eyes of a shot pheasant, and said—not, "Where am I?" as so many hurt young ladies say in books, but instead:

"Take me away, Alan. And please have some one close his eyes."

Silently I obeyed, for I knew she would come back to cry over the dead speculator who had been her father—when "some one" had straightened out that stark, huge dead old frame and contrived to close those very odd-looking, wide-open eyes, and made him look peaceful in his coffin. They would do all that, with the wonderful human patience and sympathy for which the care-takers of those who are beyond the reach of care so rarely get the credit they deserve in this worldly world; and have in truth no little trouble to collect their worldly debts!

So we buried the master of Raylescroft, in the appointed order of things; and bought back his mortgaged house—though we would never live in it—and sailed for England on one of the Southampton liners from the Cape, leaving in Africa only memories. . . .

Charing Cross Station in the grimy heart of London, with its endless, sleepless streams of preoccupied, pallid faces; the Strand, with its tireless grind and roar of traffic, are not pleasant places to one who is better accustomed to the wild silence of the African *veld*. But leaving Norma to wait in one of the huge hotels across the Strand, which to-day replace mean slums and haunts of Jacobean days, I found my way at last through Trafalgar Square and toward Piccadilly Circus to the rather dull lodg-

ings of Cecil Rhodes in Jermyn Street. Rhodes' telegram in my pocket gave me his direction.

In the street I hesitated for half a minute, then pulled the brass knocker. There was no answer, and I rang again. A Cockney footman with a pair of purple silk calves that would have done credit to Covent Garden came out at last smoking a long, lean Russian cigarette very gingerly, as if it had been a new experience for him. He had a face precisely like a bleached Griqua.

"'Oo would your 'igh Mightiness hexpect to 'ave?" he queried blandly, with a satiric stare.

"Not your 'igh Insolence, my man," said I, and quietly kicked him clear of the curb. He landed asprawl in the gutter, swallowing his Russian cigarette.

Without waiting to ascertain his subsequent actions, I strode into the brilliantly lit hall, leaving the door ajar. Suddenly another door at the end of the lobby jerked open volcanically, and there across the threshold I perceived the strong, ruddy face and hard gray eyes of Cecil Rhodes.

"Well done, Captain Severn!" quoth Rhodes enthusiastically; taking in the whole scene at a glance. "He was an unappreciated present to me from Buckingham Palace. There—he has gone on strike, and I am rid of him. Come in and tell me your story. I have no doubt it is a remarkable one."

He listened for a long time imperturbably. I

told him my extraordinary story. I told it all. Rhodes, because he knew Africa, and the men who have come out of its interior, believed. He knew that none of the queer tales that are told out of the "Dark Places of the Earth" could ever be one-half so strange as the unvarnished truth about Africa—if it were all known.

He knew that nobody could possibly invent or imagine or piece together such a tale as I told him. Outside in the darkening street brazen-lunged voices began to hawk extras of the London papers.

"The try-yul of Cessul Rhodes!"

Rhodes chuckled grimly.

"They've got me up before the Court of Inquiry, my boy," he said. "The Jamison Raid——"

I had read the *Morning Post,* and I knew about the official investigation, on the heels of that strange fiasco, the Jamison Raid. Rhodes had powerful friends in England; but not even a certain exalted Person at Windsor could wave away that Court of Inquiry.

"Public Sentiment" demanded it, the newspapers said. Whether it was manufactured sentiment or real, Rhodes did not inquire. It existed on paper—in print, at least. He had not been the prime mover in the Jamison Raid, which a few restless, hot-blooded "liberators" in the Transvaal had carried to its half-tragic, half-ridiculous conclusion in Oom Paul's back yard. He had known of it. He had

not interfered with it, being a man big enough and broad enough to let liberty sow its wild oats without meddling.

So he was discredited now; on trial for an act he had not committed—tried by a Court of Inquiry which didn't really wish to inquire. He was Premier of Cape Colony no longer, and was reasonably cool under the collar for a man who had been put to so much ado about nothing. He explained all this to me briefly; he explained that even if there was nothing left in Valkyria to annex, he, Rhodes, had no power to annex it. He could still laugh, with his remarkable broken chuckle; he was going back to Africa. . . .

"You have builded better than you dream," he said. "Buckingham Palace will want to make your acquaintance, Captain Severn. You've done England a great service; tamed a big problem—and the Mailed Hand behind it all shall never grip Africa again in its strangling fingers. That was the other Power—back of the scenes. Your Raoul de Roquemort would have cut off his right hand had he dreamed that he was lifting it for Germany!"

Then Rhodes, in less words than would fill the half of one printed page in an ordinary school primer—told me of his big ideals for Africa. In three sentences he made prophecies the world of to-day finds written down as things realized and fulfilled, in some three hundred books. It was a

wonderful thing to listen to the voices of Cecil Rhodes's people of the sun and water and wind. I knew that I had been listening to a Great Man.

The Court of Inquiry inquired, in a mild-mannered way, and Rhodes went back to help the grown children in the other land. But before he went back to Africa, having powerful friends and great influence with the highest in England, he had a private interview with Royalty. What passed he never told me; but it would not be hard to guess. For the result was another private interview in which one Alan Severn, adventurer, went into Buckingham Palace and came out Sir Alan Severn, of Severn Hall, V. C.—by the grace of God and the empire-builder, Cecil Rhodes.

I never forgot the words of Victoria of England: "Rise up, Sir Alan Severn," her clear, measured voice had said, "and teach your children what you have evidently found out for yourself with the aid of my good friend, Cecil Rhodes: that an Englishman's first duty is to the flag that Englishmen hold dear, and his second to the cause of humanity."

All that was my world of yesterday . . . Lady Norma Severn reads, and smiles somewhat sadly. To-day, Cecil Rhodes lies dead and buried in the Matoppo Mountains; Sherry is playing barrister in the most elegant law-chambers in London; Raoul de Roquemort is drilling a French regiment of Algerian Horse; and Dr. Eric Ivarsson is at Oxford,

writing the history of the lost Vikings of the Saga of Ull the Old. As for the rest, God knows where they are. . . . Perhaps the siren-call of adventure is still pounding in their ears.

THE END

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